

Pervides

*If the pages of history reveal nothing else,
it is that the human being, in all forms and personalities,
is today the same as he has always been.*

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Part One

Chapter One

865 A.D. Northern Italy.

The scent of stale blood and new death swept across the field, gently teasing the nostrils of a small red squirrel. Cautiously he moved across a soldier's motionless chest and retrieved an acorn. He scurried into a bush. The body did not stir. The squirrel, with the nut between his paws, crept from the bush and cocked his head in humanlike wonder. Disappearing momentarily to stash his prize, he returned, climbed the chest and sat back on his haunches.

A slaughter revealed itself to his eyes. The husbands of new widows lay prostrate, unknowing. Amongst them strode mourners, clergy. A large man in a black gown held a silver cross to his chest and softly recited the last rights. He crossed himself, moved on. He called loudly and a handful of men ran to him. In their arms they raised a body from the ground. He was a nobleman, a count to be exact. He too was dead. The backs of the servants strained beneath the weight. The man of God walked behind them. He prayed.

"Father in Heaven," the squirrel did not comprehend, "we commend this upright spirit to Your Hands. Blessed was he upon earth. A pillar to his people. A stalwart lord and patron knight of Your Holy Church." The priest continued long after his voice had escaped the squirrel's ears. This beast watched without moving. A servant dropped the count's leg and cursed. The priest lashed his back. Then they were in the trees, and the squirrel's gaze returned to the unburied dead. There were women moving amongst the bodies.

"Lord Simeon is dead." Said one near the rodent.

"Yes." Her companion replied. They wore the habit of Benedictine nuns.

"He was a good man." Said the first.

"He was a tyrant."

"Mirabel! He was a noble man."

"He was a man. The same as any of these." Mirabel waved her hand across the field. A leaf fell from the tree overhead and landed on her arm. Her eyes were sad. She turned from her companion in silence.

The squirrel, turning from the field, walked slowly to the man's face. His head tilted as if listening for breath. He touched the clammy, stubble lined chin, and the corpse coughed. The squirrel vanished into the bushes.

Mirabel rushed to the body's side. "He's alive!" She called. The man's chest was covered in blood. His face was sallow and cold to the touch, while his head now jerked in a fit of delirium. He, like the nobleman, was raised on the shoulders of peasants and carried from the field. The nuns followed. A solemn calm greeted them as they entered the nearby town di Gregoire.

Beads of sweat had risen on the man's face. The footsteps of the peasants kicked up a cloud of dust. In the waning sunlight it swirled about the stranger. Mirabel closed her eyes. A memory formed. It was a moonless night and the two nuns, teacher and student, sat in the garden behind the nunnery reciting a lengthy prayer in Latin.

"Once more." Mary, her companion, broke the silence of the garden. Mirabel had been gazing at the stars.

"It's beautiful, isn't it; the sky?" A soft breeze blew. The air smelt of honeysuckles.

"Yes it is; now..."

"Do you ever wonder what they are?" Mirabel turned toward Mary. She seemed old in the dark light, much older than usual, almost ghostlike or surreal.

"No." Her answer was stern. "Now, once more, after me." She began to recite the prayer.

"I wonder where the sun goes at night." Mirabel interrupted.

"To hell. Which is where you will go if you don't learn your prayers."

Mirabel was taken aback, but she did not protest. As she repeated the prayer, a sense of indignation arose within her. It was not right, what she was not sure, but there was something definitely wrong in Mary's statement.

There was a thud in the bushes, over by the apple tree, where there was a crack in the wall and the bluebirds used to sing. The women were silent. The sound of footsteps on dry branches and crackling leaves. They were light, elven-like. Mirabel clutched her rosary. Another thump, softer than the first, followed by a whispered curse. The voice was childlike, sorrowful, close. Then a flurry of movement, a squeal of surprise and the victorious return of Mary, dragging by the ear the shadowy image of a child who every few feet attempted to run, only to give in to the firm grasp of the nun. Mirabel followed the pair down a cobblestone path.

Only when they reached the candle lit entry to the nunnery did Mirabel take in the full features of a young boy. Her heart leapt. Never in her life had she witnessed such a pitiful creature. It was worse than the legless beggar who inhabited the town square and was ignored long enough he starved and died. It was three days before anyone buried him. That was terrible. But this child; it was somehow worse. The way his sullen eyes, sunk in deep black sockets, seemed so frightened that had he the mightiest, most proud, stature he would have still seemed to cower. He bore no such stature, rather a frail frame hung with disheveled skin; pale, sickly, skin. He wore the aura of hunger, of a child alone – so desperately alone in life he may soon, if he has not already, lose hope in ever being anything more than a beast.

He had the look of a wolf at the end of a long, mean, winter. Gaunt cheeks framed his small mouth with a meek frown, although a bit of a snarl would rise from time to time as he struggled against Mary's grasp. A slight spark of life arose in those brief moments, like a dying horse trying to stand or the flailing throes of a fish on the line. He was filthy too. His hands may have never been washed, and his rags scarce covered a third of the body they attempted to protect.

"You dirty little mongrel!" Mary snarled as she boxed the child across the ears. He did not flinch. "How dare you steal the Lord's fruit?" The child was silent. "Well, what have you to say?" The boy collapsed on the ground, slowly at first, then at a rush. Mary, who was holding his arm, slumped him against the wall. "Don't think that will fool me. Get up!"

"Enough!" Mirabel interrupted. She was nearly crying. "Can't you see he's starving? You ought to be ashamed."

"Sister Mirabel," Mary said sternly, "mind your place."

Mirabel did not answer, except to brush by and kneel at the child's side. She felt his forehead with her fingertips, brushed his hair gently from his face and gathered him in her arms.

"What do you think you are doing?" Mary's tone had turned bitter. "You cannot take that child in there. I forbid you. It is forbidden!" Mirabel ignored her and continued through the cloister doorway.

Chapter Two

It was two days before the boy opened his eyes. In her nineteen years of life Mirabel had never questioned things so much as in those hours beside the boy, finding in his languid face a mirror into her own doubts and memories. It was odd, though, she should find herself in him. She had never suffered. She had never known the bite of a rat that thought she was dead. The boy had. He had lain in the darkest places she could never comprehend, but still, his youthful face was the spark of consideration.

When she was his age she would sit in silk dresses and watch the thunderclouds turn the land gray. She always loved the rain and the way the peasants in the fields seemed like ants when looked at from far away. Then she realized she was an ant too. Nothing seemed the same after that.

Oh, it was not as if anything really changed. The routine ritual of every day continued its endless march toward the same unknown end. The sun went up, down. Horses neighed. Sheep baaed. And Mirabel awoke each morning, after sleeping each night.

Sometimes she felt like laughing at the oddity of it all: the pomp of the household, the pleasantness of strangers; the sad dramatics of people trying to be things they were not. But she did not laugh. No, she sat in the corner and smiled when appropriate; when her father's friends or associates complimented her or made a quaint joke. She found it strange then that so many people should pay court to her father. Were they not men also? Did they not have families to attend to, lives to live? She ached to be a small girl again – so small as when her father took her upon his back and crawled as if he was a horse – back when she never considered that he

might act wrong or mean; when the men who came were not peasants bringing required fees but happy strangers pausing to entertain her with their odd attire and peculiar glances.

She remembered the first time she witnessed sorrow. She was quite young, seven perhaps, when she left the manor house on a secret excursion to her favorite spot by the stream; where her mother and her nurse used to take her some afternoons to pass the pleasant hours beneath an array of blossoming persimmon trees. They would watch the ducks, and sometimes she would swim or listen to her nurse tell one of the stories she had heard a dozen times before but loved. It was always sunny there, or so she thought, and a rabbit lived somewhere in the brush who, sometimes, if they approached extra quiet, would be sitting at the water's edge as if he too had nothing more to do than watch the ducks and enjoy the sun. He always hopped away when he heard them, but Mirabel thought if she was to come alone he would not be scared.

The rabbit was not there. She sat disappointedly on a rock and listened to the stream. Her reflection quivered. She turned to look at it. It was familiar. Dark brown waves of hair fell relentlessly on her small shoulders. In the water her hazel eyes were silvery, creased by the hearty reflection of a ripple in the stream. Her eyebrows sagged. She had suddenly grown sad. Her narrow mouth, with its innocent lips slightly at a pout, parted momentarily as she sighed. She blew on the water and considered diving in. She reached out and touched the water, smiling softly as her face disappeared into the waves. Suddenly she wished she could do the same to her real face. She concentrated on the thought, wishing upon all wishes that such a thing would happen. She touched the tip of her aquiline nose. Nothing, except her faith in the miracle of wishes faded just a little. Eventually it would vanish all together and become replaced with a wavering faith in prayer. They were much the same, she would think in the future, praying and wishing; a little too much the same.

She heard the sound of voices. They came from up stream a bit, just beyond where she could comprehend. She turned. There were men by the giant oak. Quite a few of them. There were also two horses. On one the familiar silhouette of her father. He was talking now, and she crept along the stream until she found a nice place between two bushes where she could hear and see everything.

"Have you anything to say?" Her father said as she nestled into her hiding place. He rode his horse in a small circle around a motionless man, to whom he seemed to be speaking. No one was on the other horse. It stood just a few feet away, nibbling on a sprout of grass. Eleven men stood in an awkward arc. One was her father's secretary, whom Mirabel disliked. He always looked at her as if she was bothersome, as if he had never been a child and everything they did was useless. "Well?" Her father prompted.

"I am innocent." A meek voice answered. Her father stopped his horse in front of the man and raised his arm to three men standing a little apart from the others.

"There are three witnesses that saw you commit the murder; respectable men. Would they lie?" Of the three respectable men, two looked at the sky, while the third toed the ground and glanced at his hands. "Now, have you anything else?" Unanswering, the man hung his head. "Father."

A friar began to speak in Old Latin. Mirabel tried to listen, but the words, though vaguely familiar, sounded like nonsense. She wondered if they were playing a game. It did not seem very fun, although maybe they were just explaining the rules and would begin any moment to laugh and run about. She smiled at the idea. Yes, and the horses would dance on their hind hooves, and she would ride one all by herself. It would all be such grand fun.

It all happened so quick. The priest finished speaking, her father gave a slight nod, a man slapped the second horse and it ran off a few feet, raising the solitary man into the air. The horse stopped, and he hung there, waving back and forth.

Mirabel was transfixed. The body quivered. The left hand raised a little, as if to reach the rope, before it dropped listlessly to the side. The body began to spin. She could see the face now; the face of a dying boy. She knew him. He tended her father's stable, and when she visited the horses he always had an apple she could feed her favorite mare. His dead eyes stared at her, and she remembered his wheezing laugh when the horse licked her on the face from behind and she jumped in surprise. Then, apologizing for his laughter, he tripped on a bucket and fell on the ground. They laughed uncontrollably until her nurse took her away. He had waved goodbye with a smile. That was the last time she saw him. But now – it was entrancing the way he swayed – how his head bent forward as if he had dozed off to sleep and how no one moved or said anything. A breeze blew through the trees and a rain of leaves scattered about the body. One hit him on the head. It bounced off the same as if it had hit a stone.

"All right. Take him down." Mirabel's father spoke softly. The horse was led backwards until two men could gather the body and remove the noose. They lay him on the ground and closed his eyes. "Bury him over there." Her father pointed toward the stream. Four men remained to dig. The rest followed her father toward the house. Mirabel did not move. The scrapes and thuds of shoveling were rhythmic, and she was aware of nothing else until they stopped and silently approached the body. One of the men crossed himself. Then the rest did, and they bent to gather the carcass in their arms. They lay him gently in the hole and then crossed themselves again before covering him with earth.

Mirabel crept back to the rock beside the stream and began to weep. The image of the boy's face appeared as she closed her eyes. She tried to remember his name. She could not. Why did they do such a thing? She looked up for an answer. No one was there. Then a brief noise, the rustling of a blade of grass and the rabbit cautiously hopped into view. Her wet cheeks could not help but smile and a short giggle escaped her lips. The rabbit cocked his head, listened but did not sprint away. He lowered his head a moment to take a nibble of grass and then looked up while he chewed it. He was always watching; always aware. Suddenly he darted away. Mirabel heard her name being called by her nurse. She wiped her face on her arm and bent down to splash a little water on her face before running toward the voice.

Chapter Three

When the boy awoke he found himself in a strange room. A large wooden crucifix hung opposite the bed and on a table beside the bed were a mug of water and a small loaf of bread. He glanced cautiously about before reaching out from the warm blankets and cradling the bread to his chest. He gnawed at it ravenously, pausing from time to time to take a breath or gulp of water. Finished, he sat up fully and looked at the door. A desire to flee overwhelmed. He pushed back the covers and crept to the door. It began to open slowly, and he froze. Mirabel peeked inside. She smiled.

"Hello." She said, entering. "My name is Mirabel." The boy, with eyes turned meekly to the ground, returned a quick smile. "Are you feeling better?" He nodded. "Well." She burst into smile again. "Would you like to take a bath? The water is still warm." He nodded demonstratively and grasped her offered hand. His small feet shuffled as he attempted to keep up with Mirabel's easy gait. They passed through a hallway lined with identical doors. They entered the last door on the left. It was a small room separated into two small compartments, each of which housed a stone bathtub. Mirabel led him to the left partition. "These are for you." She said, laying her hand on a small pile of clothes. "For when you are done. I'll be outside." She smiled and left the room.

The boy touched the water. It was only slightly better than lukewarm, and there was a film on the surface from the filth of the previous bathers. Hastily he shed his rags and clambered inside.

There are moments such as these in every life; instances of unknown purity which enshrine our bodies and minds with a sense of pleasure so overpowering we lose ourselves in the present moment and forget all else. The hardships he had known in life were overshadowed. The world was distant; the warm water like the womb. As the layers of dirt lifted from his skin, the water grew chill and he discovered the long repressed feeling of hope. It shone from his heart, warming him and he leapt from the water with a smile beaming on his face.

"My, don't you look handsome." Mirabel said when he joined her. He held his rags in his hand and stared at the ground, although he could hardly stifle the grin attempting to burst from his lips. "I wasn't sure those would fit you. Do you feel better?"

"Yes ma'am." His speech was polite, quiet and somewhat mumbled into his collar. "Thank you." He finally lifted his eyes to hers and smiled fully.

"Come on." She offered her hand. He accepted, and they walked to his room at a gentle pace. They passed a nun in the hall. She nodded with a gentle softness in her eyes. The boy felt safe, and he was grinning until they reached the room. A cloud of unease spread across his face.

"Am I going to have to leave?" His eyes returned to the ground.

"Not until we figure out what to do with you." She sat on the edge of the bed as he climbed in. "Have you anywhere to go?" She pulled the blankets to his chest and touched him on the cheek.

"No." Melancholy spread across his face.

"Your parents?" She smiled doubtfully.

"I don't know." He closed his eyes and turned toward the wall.

"Well, we can talk about it later. But don't worry; you can stay here until we find somewhere better. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Now rest." She rose from the bed and, after standing a moment of silence, left the room.

"How is he?" The mother superior asked as Mirabel entered her office. Her eyes glowed with sincere concern.

"Much better. He should be up and about by tomorrow, or the next day, but..."

"What my child?"

"He is worried about what will happen to him; so am I. We can't just throw him back into the street."

"No, of course not, but obviously he can't stay here. A nunnery is no place for a boy." She smiled. "Poor boy, he would be babied to death." A short chuckle escaped her lips. She waved her hand as if to dismiss such silliness. "What would you suggest we do?"

"I don't know, except growing up we always had boys working in the stables and kitchens. What about Lord Simeon? His estate is much larger than my father's. Surely something could be arranged. Or a tradesman could take him as an apprentice. Or we could send him to the seminary. Or, I don't know. There must be something."

The mother leaned back and rubbed her chin. The wrinkles on her face moved with each stroke; the shadow running from the light. "I do not know," she said, "if the seminary would be possible, but I could speak with the abbot. Something might be arranged, but it would take time. I have heard awful things of how a lot of tradesmen treat children, so unless we can find the right master that is a poor choice. No, I think Lord Simeon's estate is most reasonable. Surely, if the boy is willing to work, something can be arranged. Lord Simeon is a Christian, after all, even if his actions can cause one to doubt. I think, perhaps, it would be best if you spoke with his son. Samson has a good heart." The mother twisted her lips in thought. Mirabel's eyes had opened wide. "Mirabel, when the boy is ready, I take him to Lord Simeon's manor. Request to speak to Lord Samson. Tell them you come at the behest of both myself and Abbot Rinaldo."

"Yes mother superior."

"Good." She nodded. "Now, my dear, it is time for vespers." The two women arose and left the room, the mother to her chamber, Mirabel to the hall. She joined the silent march to the chapel. As she knelt on the chill stone floor, she attempted to focus on the rite, but her mind lingered in memory.

The last time she had been to Lord Simeon's was on the count's fortieth birthday. She was sixteen, and when she entered the great hall in a fine new dress she felt like a princess. In truth she was the daughter of a lowly baron. Lord Simeon, however, had an affinity for her father. In their youth they had fought and bled together in some untold battle, while in their latter years they would drink away the odd evening with the loud songs of their past, retreading their great deeds and to salute the bravery of the dead. They were also wont to hold hunting parties and secret meetings in her father's chambers. Mirabel always felt intimidated by the count and found it stranger her father should placate the every whim of the angry man he often called his friend.

The hall was lit with tapers and glowed with an ambiance of nobility. Her father simply beamed when they were seated first among the lower nobles, to his left only the end of the high table where sat the count, his wife and sons, the Abbot Rinaldo and a few other individuals of choice breed.

"Marquis di Alivo." Her father whispered, motioning secretively to the dignified man seated beside Lord Simeon. "He has a summer palace in Venice and a mansion in the very heart of Rome. A very wealthy and powerful man. They say he has the ear of Pope Nicholas."

Mirabel was struck by the look in her father's eye. There was reverence she did not understand. Was the marquis not just a man? Strip him of his fine clothes and shining jewels, what quality did he hold above the rest of men? She studied him. There was something; an air of being bred to believe he was and always would be better than all but the most rare of men. Suddenly the marvel of the event wore off. She saw, as if for the first time, the servants which placed the dishes and received less respect than the dogs which lay at Lord

Simeon's feet. She remembered, compared, the gaunt faces of the villagers as she rode past the previous day. Where were they now, those starving wretches? It made her sad, reticent, but then she looked at her father's glowing face and wondered how such joy could be wrong.

"Pardon, my lady." A lackey interrupted her disillusion. "My Lord Samson requests the honor of sharing the first dance with my lady."

"She would be delighted, of course." Mirabel's mother answered before she could utter a word.

"Yes, thank my lord for the invitation." Mirabel added, blushing slightly as she caught sight of Samson. He nodded.

"Lord Simeon's eldest son." Her mother said with a hint of envy. "You will do well to catch more than his eye, daughter of mine."

Though the words were whispered, Mirabel blushed a deeper red. But how could she not think of it? He was a handsome, a nineteen year old youth with a confident nobility of a different sort than the marquis. His dark brown hair fell lightly at the back of his neck, and when he laughed he held his cup from his lips with a deft hand which seemed at once capable of tenderness and strength. She began in glances to glean a picture of who he was.

Soon the melodic sounds of pipes, lutes and harps filled the hall, and suddenly Mirabel was enamored with the splendor of it all. Then he was there, standing before her table and asking with a short bow for her to join him in dance. They were the first pair, and as he led her by the arm to the open space between the tables, she felt the eyes of everyone shining on them. It felt good to be looked at.

They reached the center of the hall, and the musicians formed a ring around them. They turned to each other, and their eyes met. His were a deep blue, though they seemed almost black in the dim light of the room. A smile crowned both mouths, and they bowed. The harp struck the first cord, and their steps became metered out by the rich texture of the instruments.

The servants had cleared the dishes, although the wine remained, and talk turned to softer things. To Mirabel and Samson, however, these things were distant. They absorbed each other. Her scent, he took in; the sweet decadence of crushed flower petals dabbed behind the ear and on the wrist. His smooth hands, cut by a scar she could feel on his palm. The way her ear lobes, with their shining rings, curved back up, while his attached at an angle down. The subtle arc of his eyebrows. Her supple lips, faintly red in the dark, pink when they caught the light from the great fireplace. The curl of hair behind her ear. Her wavy lashes which surrounded her round eyes with lush lines of sensuality. Her emerging breasts, softly wrapped in the most fashionable of gowns. The gentle beat of his heart, noticeable at intervals in his fingertips. The symmetry of his nose; its appropriate size, comparable to the desirability of her own. The way a dimple rose on his right cheek when he smiled, but not his left. The whiteness of her teeth. The rich fabric of his clothes, and the ease with which they wore on him. The subtle dip in his right shoulder. The slight way the left side of her chin was more square than the right. The birthmark on his neck; a round, reddish, circle on the right side, half hidden by his tunic. Every flaw, every trait, emerged unseen but absorbed by the ever vigil consciousness which hides within the mind. As such, she did not notice, or even think, but knew that he was just the slightest bit pigeon-toed, and he knew her index fingers bent slightly more than usual toward the center of her hand.

As the song came to an end, he led her once more by the arm to where her parents sat and, with a bow and a thank you, returned to his seat.

"You danced splendidly." Her mother assaulted her as she was seated. "I am proud of you darling." She squeezed her daughter's elbow affectionately. "You didn't miss a single step. Nor did he. Oh, that I were young."

The remainder of the night was a blur; a series of strangers, footsteps and brief glances shared with Samson's searching eyes. Only at the final dance did the pair reunite.

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" Samson asked with a smile as they walked to the floor.

"Yes. It has been a splendid evening. But my feet are a little sore."

"We do not have to dance, if you would like to rest."

"No. I want to dance with you."

"Thank you." Their eyes locked and for a moment they did not move. Then they laughed, and the music whisked them away into silence.

When the music ended they stood arm in arm and considered each other. Their eyes still danced. Then something broke through the light in Samson's eyes. "I am going away." He said sullenly. Her eyes too died a little. "To the south to fight the Saracens." Mirabel's eyes grew soft, almost sad. "May I write you, with your father's permission?"

"Of course." Her words were lost in the quivering of her lips.

"Thank you." They retreated toward Mirabel's parents, their arms now linked with longing, hope. Then there was the tinkling of a bell, and Mirabel was shaken back to the nunnery. She blinked away memory.

She walked slowly to her room. The boy was asleep, and sitting in the chair beneath the crucifix, she dozed off as well. She was awakened by the sound of coughing. The boy smiled and stretched when she looked at him.

"Did you sleep well?" She asked, yawning.

"Yes ma'am."

"That's good." She said, still sleepily. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll get you something."

"Thank you ma'am."

"You can call me Mirabel." She smiled. "And what shall I call you?"

"I don't have a name." He looked down.

"What do people call you then?"

"Boy, mostly. Or you. Sometimes urchin."

"Still, you must call yourself something."

"No. A name is for other people. I have no one."

"How sad." She moved her chair to the bed. "But I must call you something. I know; you can pick your own name."

"Louis." He said without hesitation.

"Like the emperor?" He nodded and began to smile. "Would you like to be king of Italy too?" She laughed.

"No ma'am; Mirabel; but I like his name."

"Well, Louis, if you do not want to be king, is there anything else you would like to be?"

"Only free to be my own man, to bury my hands in my own soil and to love and be loved."

For some reason these words stuck in Mirabel's mind. They fell from his tongue as a recitation, as if the words had been drilled into him, or someone he had loved had spoken them.

"I will get you something to eat." Mirabel said, rising. "Then we will talk some more. Okay?"

"Thank you, Mirabel."

"Louis." She nodded and left the room.

Chapter Four

Louis fell asleep in Mirabel's arms. She sat awake considering the travails he had faced. The telling had been fraught with tears, from both his eyes and hers, and at the end she came to the uneasy conclusion that, faced with the same circumstances, she never would have survived.

His earliest memory was of fire; of awakening, alone, to flames and staggering through the smoke. He reached a door and pushed against it. It would not open. He coughed and charged again. He and the door fell together, and when he looked up the eyes of a dead horse stared at him. Its teeth were yellow and brown, and he had the sense that he had ridden it, perhaps on his father's lap. There was a fly singed to its nose. A single wing still tried to fly.

He crawled from the doorway. Behind him the building collapsed. He did not look.

That night he slept beneath a tree. It was a long night filled with smoke and futile listening for a familiar step to come and shake him from a dream. No one came. In the morning he staggered back to the village. Charred carcasses crept from the ruins: an arm poking between stones; a half melted face, its mouth open as if

laughing; a child he should have recognized: nothing but a black skull and mangy, tattered, scraps of cloth randomly glued to the remnants of her skin. She would have been his age, and perhaps, his wife. But she was dead.

He stood outside a house already faded from his memory and took it all in. A blanket waved with the breeze. It hung across a window that had escaped the fire. He wrapped it around his shoulders. A stone fell from the wall and landed in the ashes with a puff of soot. He looked at it, at everything around him, and began to weep. He cried for his mother, an agonizing, shrill, call that shook the crows from the trees. He called again. No answer. Even the wind had died. He collapsed against a wall and buried his face in his arms.

For a long time he was alone with his tears in the blackness of his closed eyes. He tried to remember his mother's face. He could not. This made him cry more than anything. Just yesterday she had been there, and now? He looked up. The sky was full of clouds, and it seemed like it might rain.

Hungry, he wandered to where the crabapple trees grew like grass and made a meal of the bitter fruit. He would stay there a long time, sleeping in a small bushel of grass and passing his days idly exploring the fields and streams which surrounded the orchard.

About that time life returned to the village. Workers cleared the rubble, built new structures and began to tear at the earth with picks and shovels. Louis watched with curiosity and from time to time snuck into the emerging village to beg or steal a bit of food. Through the winter an elderly man always had a scrap on his back doorstep. He even invited Louis to stay a few times, but the boy always ran back to his place in the trees and slept like a lamb beneath the stars.

An entire year passed in that gentle life. The mine grew deeper and the village grew fluxed with passing swarms of laborers. The old man died the second winter, or went away, or grew too poor, or fat, to share with the scarecrow of a boy who lurked at his door come evening time. Soon after Louis gave up on him, there were men amongst the apple trees. At first it was just a few, but when the sawyers set up camp he gathered his blanket and retreated further into the woods.

It was hard to find food that winter. Sometimes he would not eat for many days, lying in the hollow tree he now called home, his teeth chattering and his delirious mind making dragons of the wind. But he always found the strength to rise, to creep through the forest to the miner's town, or the sawyer's camp, and find a morsel unprotected by some stranger's fire. A few times he was noticed or chased away, but in general, he did not exist to anyone but himself. He slept most of the time curled up in a dreamless sleep which left him emptier each night. He grew to associate the smell of dirt and rotting bark with home. Meanwhile, the trees fell, and by spring construction had begun on a structure larger than any Louis had ever seen.

"Boy!" A voice surprised Louis soon after construction had begun. "Oh, boy, what are you doing in that hole?" He had just returned to his hollow tree. He did not answer, hoping they would leave. "Come on boy." The voice beckoned. "We saw you go in." Louis made a motion but did not stir. "Come out," a face filled the opening of the hollow, "or we'll fill the hole with arrows." Reluctantly Louis crept from his seclusion, holding his hand in front of his eyes as he stood before two gawking men. "What a fine prize we've found today." The same man continued. He was the shorter of the two and wore a brown tunic and a black hat. He carried a bow and quiver, as well as a sack, which bulged with unseen contents.

"He is indeed William." The other man said. He was tall, thin and dressed entirely in black. He looked like a raven, his eyes glancing constantly about as if he was afraid or starving. "A regular little troll. Do you think he has treasure?" Both men laughed.

"Hardly Gnat." William answered. "He looks like he hasn't eaten for a month."

"It could be a disguise."

"Who would disguise themselves like that?"

"A sprite. Or an elf."

"Bah, there you go again believing those stupid tales Miranda puts in your head. They're not real I tell you."

"I think they are." The man called Gnat said with a tone of anger. "And I think he's one. No boy would be living out here. Think of it Will. There are no children in town. Maybe he's a gnome." Gnat's eyes lit up with a greedy look. "Maybe it's his horde they're mining over in the hill. Maybe he has gold." He rubbed his hands.

"Quit dreaming blockhead. He's just a boy. Aren't you?" He finally addressed Louis.

"Yes sir." He stammered.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Gnat said sarcastically. "If you say you're a boy, then, by Jove, you must be a boy. Come on Will, he's not going to admit what he really is. We have to guess. Then he'll reveal his true form. Don't you know anything?"

"I know you are a fool." He said quietly as he began rummaging through his bag. "Well, boy, or nymph, or whatever you are, would you like some cheese?" He held out a block to Louis. The boy did not move. "Go ahead, take it. We've got more than enough."

Louis grasped the offered food and began to nibble at it. After a moment he began to take large bites, and the cheese disappeared.

"Hungry little devil, aren't you?" Gnat addressed Louis. "Well, for now, I'll assume you're a boy, but if you're not, I will find out." He narrowed his eyes suspiciously for a moment. "In the meantime, what are you doing out here all alone?"

"I used to live in the village." Louis answered distantly. His own voice sounded like a dream. A slight memory of his previous life rose but faded with remembrance of the fire.

"In that village?" Gnat pointed over his shoulder toward the mining town. "There's never been children there."

"He means before." William interrupted. "But that was more than a year ago."

"Oh. That." Gnat said dejectedly, looking at the ground.

"Have you been up here all this time?" Louis nodded. "My lord, it is a miracle you've lived so long."

"Hell, it's a miracle he survived." Gnat added. "Do you remember what it looked like?"

"Gnat." William restrained him. "Not the best time." The two men looked at each other. William scratched his head and Gnat his shoulder. "What do you think?"

"Why not?" Gnat answered. "We can find some use for him. Besides, he may yet turn out to be magical." He smiled.

"It's decided then." Will squatted so he could look Louis in the face. "We're going to take you home with us, okay? There's no need for you to live like this anymore." Louis nodded hesitantly, glancing back at the hollow of the tree. For a moment he thought to dash inside. "Come on then." Will took Louis by the shoulder, and they headed toward the mining town.

"Not much of a catch today, was it?" Gnat said with a sparkle in his eyes. "Two hares and a scrawny boy. I wonder which will make a better meal?" He laughed at his own joke, a wheezing laugh which only sounded when he breathed in. Will smiled. Louis did not think it was funny and closed his eyes. He imagined he was in his tree, asleep beneath the warm blanket.

Home was a small bordello in a ramshackle house of three rooms, one of which was partitioned by blankets to form individual sanctuaries for the prostitutes.

"Miranda!" Gnat called affectionately as they entered the low ceilinged building. "We've got a surprise for you."

"In a minute." A hoarse voice called from behind one of the curtains. The unfamiliar sounds of interlocking bodies filled Louis' ears. The entire room was dim and smelled of smoke, which seeped from a poorly built fireplace in the second room. The men led the boy into this room, where a small bar stood empty. Two tables filled the remainder of the space. At one a young woman was sleeping. Gnat walked to her and tapped her on the head.

"Camille, dear, how about a drink?" She raised her head and looked at Gnat with a snarl in her eyes. He smiled and softly touched her on the cheek. "Such a face. Yet such attitude. How I do love the way you suffer. Now, that drink?"

She raised herself from the table with an exhausted sigh and walked to the bar without a word. She filled two mugs from a barrel of wine and set them on the counter. William lay the two rabbits next to them.

"Clean those." He said. "And take this boy with you. He can help."

She glanced at Louis for the first time and shuddered.

"Where did you get a child?" She asked with disgust.

"He was in the woods. Had been since this place burned." Gnat answered between swigs.

"And we did our Christian duty to take in this orphan and provide him refuge." William finished.

Camille shook her head and glared at the two men. She was about to speak when Miranda entered.

"What have we here?" She said in a bellowing voice. Miranda was a fat woman who smelled of apples and walked with a peculiar wobble, as if only one leg at a time was capable of moving. "What a darling child. Hello." She bent down in front of Louis. "My name is Miranda." She gathered him into an embrace. The skin on her face, where it touched his own cheeks, was leathery, and he could feel the lumps of fat in her chest as she pressed against him. At length she released him. He backed away. She laughed. "Shy little bloke, isn't he." She said. Then, with a grunt. "What do you plan to do with him?"

"We shall talk of that presently." Will answered. "For now, boy, go with Camille." He handed one of the rabbits to Louis. Camille grabbed the other and led him through the final room of the house to the back door, which opened to a tiny courtyard.

"Set it down here." She said as she placed her rabbit on a stone. "We must get some water from the stream." She picked up a bucket from beside the stone and held out her hand to Louis. He took hold. It was callused and rough, with the nails worn down or broken. She walked with her head down, silent, until they had gone a distance from the house. She stopped and knelt before Louis, looking him in the eye. Her eyes were soft, but there was tragedy in them; a look of dying more than living, as if a portion of her being had already succumbed to death. "Have you anywhere to go?" Her voice was pleasant, serious.

"No."

"This is no place for you to live, or for me." She turned her eyes to her thoughts, then back to him. "We will find you something better, but until then be careful. Those three will try to make you do things;" she paused; "terrible things. I will protect you as best I can, but the day will come when you must simply run. I will try to run with you, but; she looked over his shoulder, as if at something far away; I may not be able to." Her skin had a yellow pallor, and he noticed for the first time red marks on her neck. "Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"What do you do if things get too bad?"

"Run."

"Yes." She smiled. One tooth was missing and three others were chipped. It had been once, perhaps, a pretty smile, but no longer. It made her look old. "Now, shall we fetch some water?"

Louis nodded, and they set off for the stream, winding through the short streets of the village. They held hands, and Louis felt safe. They passed a blacksmith who gave a friendly nod. Louis waved, and the man tipped his hammer in salute. The next houses were long and empty. The residents of these spent their days in the mines, from the brink of light till the last shadow of dusk. Once a week they received a handful of coins, which quite often fell into Miranda's swarthy hands in exchange for either alcohol or lust.

Camille was one of three associates employed in the house. The others, who Louis would later meet, were Jasmine and Anna. Anna was a pale creature, more sickly than even Camille. She coughed when she spoke, and when she catered to a customer, she groaned like a cat being beaten with a stick. She rarely left her bed, other than to eat or when Miranda called her to the barroom to peddle her like a horse.

Jasmine was a buxom woman, darkly toned with the face of a Jewess. She was the healthiest and happiest of the women; the only one, Miranda aside, who seemed to enjoy her craft. Sometimes there would be a line of men waiting for her while the other whores were all free. And she claimed each one from his seat with what seemed a genuine smile, caressing his ego with empty compliments. When she met Louis she kissed him on the cheek, and she smelled of sex, though he was as yet unaware of it.

This was the household into which Louis was introduced. He was given a small pile of hay in the corner of the third room, where William and Gnat slept if the women were occupied with business. Occasionally Camille would come to the room and sleep beside him.

Camille should have been a child yet herself, but at scarce seventeen she had been a resident of the house for over three years.

"It's not as if I like it here." She told Louis as they cleaned and skinned the rabbits. "But I have no way out. Of the money I make, they take most of it for room and board. It's ridiculous, I know, but Miranda takes all the money. What she gives me isn't enough to buy anything. I've saved since I got here, and I couldn't live for two weeks if I left." She stabbed the knife into the rabbit's stomach and sliced it open. She held the knife with cold blood dripping from it and stared at it. She started to speak, ceased and shrugged her shoulders before continuing with the task. Her blonde hair fell in curls across her face as she leaned over the bucket to clean the meat, and Louis realized she was sad.

"Thank you." He said softly, placing his small, dirty, hand on her shoulder. She looked up and smiled, a tear rimming on her eye. Her mouth wavered and fell. She opened her arms to him, and as they embraced, he could feel her tears on his neck. He was happy then, in her arms. "It will be all right." He managed to say through the locks of her hair.

"Of course it will." Camille answered as she released her grasp. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders, and she looked him in the eyes. "Everything will be fine, in the end." The pause was long before the final words, and she attempted a quick smile which failed to elicit any true hope in either Louis or herself.

"Aren't you finished yet?" Gnat called from the doorway. "Get that meat in the pot." He glowered as Camille gathered the flesh in an apron and headed into the house. "Quit lollygagging wench." He slapped her on the back as she entered. "What?" He said, noticing the glare which had arisen in Louis' eyes. "Do you want some too?" He raised his hand.

"Gnat!" William's voice called from inside. "Enough. Let him pass."

Louis rushed through the door and attempted to follow Camille toward the fireplace, but William halted him.

"Now boy," he said, "sit down a moment." They moved to one of the tables in the barroom. "Tell me, do you want to eat?"

"Yes."

"Then there are a few little things you will have to do. Nothing really."

"Like helping clean the rabbits?"

"Yes." William's face lit up. "Things like that. There will be other things too. But that is enough for today. Is that okay? I mean, do you want to stay?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Now run along and help Camille with supper." Louis retreated to the fireplace. "The two of them," William turned to Gnat, who sat at the second table, "make a great pair."

"They sure do." Gnat answered with a laugh. "Fools the both of them."

The front door of the establishment opened, and a ragged man stepped in. His face was dirty, and his eyes darted from side to side.

"Is Jasmine available?" He asked with a scratchy voice.

"Sorry love." Miranda answered. "She and Anna went to town. We've only Camille and myself."

The man glanced at Camille, who had been ordered to the room by Will, then back at Miranda. He scratched his chin.

"All right. Her then." He motioned to Camille as he deposited a few coins in Miranda's hand. Camille approached languidly and led him into the recesses of the room.

"Where are those two anyway?" Miranda said, entering the barroom. "They had better not cost me any money."

"They'll be here." William answered from the fire, where he had assumed the cooking duties. "They know what will happen if not." A rasping groan drifted from the next room. It sounded, to Louis, like the man was in pain. "Hey boy." Will tapped him on the head. He had been staring at the open doorway. "Watch this pot. When it boils tell me."

"Okay."

After that it was a blur. Jasmine and Anna returned. Camille entered the room, her face tattered with blankness. The water boiled. The rabbit meat, potatoes and porridge were placed in the double pot to cook. Then there was a steady stream of noisy men at the door, and the women appeared and reappeared in cycles. Men began to drink, laugh and curse. Louis was banished to the back room and shown where to sleep. Strange moans from time to time pierced the revelry from the bar and sometimes there were tones of anger; of drunken men fighting and being mauled. Such moments always seemed followed by laughter and the refreshed thumping of mugs.

Louis curled himself on the floor and missed his lonely tree. He looked at the backdoor and thought to run, but she kept him there. She was hope. When she lay down beside him that night, she held him close, like a teddy bear.

Chapter Five

Louis stood in the middle of the muddy road which connected the village to a larger town five miles to the south. He wore no shirt and was smeared with dirt across the chest and face. He shivered and glanced about with unease. The whiny of a horse reached his ears from around the bend towards town, and shortly after came the rattling sounds of a cart, its large wheels struggling in the muck. Rounding the corner, the driver pulled the reins back, stopping the snorting beasts only a few yards before they would have stamped Louis into the ground.

"Why have we stopped?" A voice called from the rear of the cart.

"But sir, there is a boy in the road."

A hooded man poked his head up beside the driver. "What does he want?"

"What do you want?" The driver asked Louis.

"Help me." He answered slowly, his teeth chattering while he spoke.

"For God's sake child, get out of the road." The hooded man called to him. "Make him move." He said before disappearing from sight.

"You heard him." The driver said. "Move along." Louis looked at him with cloudy eyes but did not stir.

"Come on, don't make me whip you." He raised the mentioned device and waved it back and forth.

"Help me." Louis repeated and then collapsed into the mud.

"Heaven's sake." The driver muttered to himself. "Sir," he said loudly, "the boy fainted."

"Well move him, or drive over him. Whichever, get us moving."

"Yes, my lord." The driver lowered himself to the ground and walked toward Louis. "Get up!" He yelled, and then cracked the whip. The horses pawed the ground. "Poor devil." He said when he stood over the child. As he bent to pick him up, a quick rustling in the bushes sounded behind him. A thick club to the back of his head knocked him unconscious, and he fell on top of Louis. Two masked men approached the cart.

"Good day, my lord, is it?" Said the shorter one as he reached the cart. The second man stood a few feet away with an arrow on his bowstring. "If you would be so kind as to show yourself."

"William." The hooded man said sternly as he stood in the cart. It was a voice accustomed to giving orders; a full voice born in the lowest realms of the chest. He slowly removed his hood, revealing a balding head. "I should kill you for this." William lowered the dagger he had been holding. "And Gnat, if you do not lower that bow, you will not live to see the moon tonight." Gnat did as ordered.

"I apologize, my lord." William bowed and removed his mask. "We did not expect you would be traveling like this."

"Very well. But for your confusion you now owe me forty-five percent."

"But, my lord." William begged.

"Forty-five percent." The voice was authoritative. "Or you do not do business. At all. Understood?"

"Yes my lord."

"Very well. Now help my driver and clear the damned child off the road. He is yours, I suppose."

"Yes my lord."

"Do not make this mistake again."

Gnat had pulled the driver to his feet and led him to the cart rubbing his head.

"Sorry mate." Gnat said. "Just business, you know."

The driver punched him in the jaw before climbing to his seat. Gnat, rubbing his jaw, handed him his whip.

"No hard feelings chum." The driver said with a scowl. He snapped the whip, and the team started off. William and Gnat bowed their heads while it passed. Louis simply watched.

"Damn!" William groaned as soon as the cart disappeared. "That noble bastard. Fifteen percent, Gnat. We can't afford that."

"What if we don't pay? How would he know?"

"He knows Gnat. He knows every centime taken on this road, and by whom. If we didn't pay, we'd be dead. Simple as that. Damn it. Of all the luck."

"Why's he have to go sneaking around like that anyway?"

"Because, Gnat, he's the freaking count. He can't exactly go around meeting folks like us with his entire entourage or invite us to his castle. What do you expect; to answer a knock on the door one day and find a page announcing 'my Lord Simeon, Count di Gregoire' and for him to prance in with his nose held high and a flock of servants and fools by his side?"

"No."

"Of course not you dimwit." They had begun walking. "But I do wonder what business brought him this way. It must be in the village if he's traveling this late."

"There was some trouble at the mine the other day. Maybe it has something to do with that."

"What? Oh, the madman."

"He wasn't mad, not by any means. I heard this was his village; you know, before." He glanced at Louis, who walked ahead, dragging a stick on the ground. "He certainly threw a fright into those guys. But then he just left."

"Why do you suppose he did that?"

"Claudio said he was asking a bunch of questions about who burnt the town. No one knew anything, of course. They all came afterward. Then he began asking about who built this town and who owns the chateau in the apple orchards. Someone told him it was Lord Simeon's. That's when he left."

"Interesting. I always figured someone would eventually show up. We should find out who he is. He might be worth something to Lord Simeon, or..." William grew silent and rubbed his chin. "No. No, it's too risky."

"What?"

"Nothing. Forget I said anything. The count is no man to trifle with."

"True. Nor is his driver." Gnat rubbed his jaw and opened his mouth wide. William laughed. His chest rose as he walked, and he narrowed his eyes as he chuckled. "It's not funny Will. You wouldn't laugh if it was you." A purple bruise had risen on his skin.

"Oh," Will finished his laugh with a sigh, "we need something new. No one stops for the brat anymore, except carts and they don't have much to take."

"Food, most of the time."

"But never gold."

"There are carts with gold, but they're Lord Simeon's."

"That's the key, isn't it? It's all his. He's the only guy worth robbing."

"But how could we Will? Those shipments are guarded by a dozen men. We've us."

"First of all, Gnat, it is not the gold we want but the coins. We could never carry or hide that much ore. But the coins for the workers; those we could take. Hmm; I wonder." He paused. Then loudly. "Hey boy, run on up ahead." He was silent until Louis was beyond the tremor of his voice. "What we need, Gnat, is a distraction; someone for the guards to chase."

"A dozen men Will. That is a mighty big distraction."

"Oh, Gnat, my simple friend, it is not a dozen but three."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think there is a pile of coins just sprouting from the earth? They are brought each week by one of Lord Simeon's secretaries. He is escorted by exactly three armed men. They are all disguised, of course, as lowly workers or tradesmen. We need only to distract them."

"But I thought the coins came back with the wagon that takes the gold to Lord Simeon."

"So did I, but the coins come only the night before the exchange. The rest of the time they are in Lord Simeon's castle. He does not trust the foreman at the mine."

"But still, three men? And they won't stop for no child in the road."

"No, indeed they will not. We need a better guise. What we need is a goat and some armor and a wooden sword."

"What on earth for Will?"

Will proceeded to describe his plan. Meanwhile, Louis waked ahead, still dragging the stick in the mud. It had been two months since the men found him in the woods. In that time he had gradually become involved

in their capers, ever so slowly graduating from household chores to small thefts and deceits. For three weeks now he had joined the men on their daily rounds, whether they were hunting, thieving or a little of both.

There was some small part of him that perceived it was wrong, but he had grown accustomed to the company, mostly to the warm smile of Camille. He treasured the moments they spent together, though they were often cut short by mean squeals or rage from their masters.

One night they slept beneath the trees, and in the stars Camille traced for him her dreams. She imagined a little cottage on the outskirts of some small town, where fields of flowers bloomed, the clouds were soft and gloriously sweet. She dreamed of a view of the ocean, which once as a child she had seen, where the seabirds called their shrill cries and the air smelt of salt and fish. There she would cook her own meals and maybe sew for some coins. She would dig in the earth and grow grapes, or maybe olives, for wine. There she would walk with the confidence of freedom, and Louis could live there too. In the fields they could keep a small flock of sheep, whom he could tend and love so deeply that when one was injured he could mother it until it healed.

There were times it seemed Camille had gone to that place entirely. She would sit by herself and smile like she was somewhere else, or rather, that she knew, or felt, something she could in no way impart. In those moments, William would leave her alone, as if he recognized in her gaze something beyond himself; something that could not be broken. Only Miranda would trouble her.

"Off in dreamland again, eh?" She would say and slap Camille on the back of the head. "Wake up you hussy. There is work to do." And she would find her the most foul tasks, which Camille would undertake with the peculiar smile still latched to her lips, a defiant assurance on her face which angered Miranda into a rage. Once she perceived the bond between Camille and Louis, he became the target of these tantrums.

The first time she shoved his face in a chamber pot and held him there until he vomited. She laughed and gloated over Camille's tearful pleading for her to cease. Sometimes she would beat him with a stick, and Gnat, or Jasmine and Anna, would hold Camille. They laughed at the sight, and Camille would stare blankly, her jaw set with wordless anger. Meanwhile, Louis would bear the beating without sound, curled up on the ground, his eyes closed, the image of the cottage by the sea floating in the darkness of his mind.

Only the previous day, before meeting with Lord Simeon's cart, Camille and Louis sat before the fire, their bodies narrowly touching as they stared silently into the flames.

"Egad." Gnat's voice drifted across the room. "Charlemagne's ghost. Are you sure?"

"Of course." Miranda answered. They sat across the table from each other, each with a mug of wine. Jasmine was napping beside them. "I saw it with my own eyes when I was a little girl. He haunts the cave every full moon, dressed in full regale. His crown shines like the sun. And his eyes; I can't describe those eyes. They burned me; right here." She tapped her forehead.

"I don't see anything."

"Inside, you twit. That's where I got my sight."

"From Charlemagne's ghost?"

"Yes, Gnat. You know how I see things, like when you found that runt over there. Remember, I said you would find him."

"You did?"

"I said there was change coming, just that morning, then you find him. Do I need to be any more clear?"

"No, Miranda, I just forgot. You told us all right. You tell us lots of things."

"Yes, and I have something new."

"What is it? Is it good?"

"Patience, Gnat. I had a dream last night; a vision. The boy..." She broke off and looked toward the fireplace. "Camille." There was no response. "Camille!" Miranda's face grew red. "Boy!" He did not answer. "That is too much. She's got him doing it too. They're off in dreamland, the both of them." She rose from the table and approached the fire. She grabbed Louis around the neck and picked him up. His feet dangled in the air, and he gasped for breath. She held him closer. Camille stood and looked at Miranda. The look on her face made the obese woman stagger back. It was placid but bore the determination of a she-wolf protecting her cub.

"Release him." Camille said coldly. "And if you ever touch him again, I will kill you."

"Well I." Miranda let Louis fall on the ground. "It's." Camille was still staring at her. Miranda had turned white. "Didn't. Don't you. I never."

A crash silenced her as Gnat broke a stool over the back of Camille's head. She dropped to the ground unconscious, and Louis, just recovering awareness, crawled to her and took her head in his arms. There was blood on his fingers where he touched her hair.

"Don't let her talk to you like that." Gnat said. "She'll get ideas."

Miranda, her mouth still slightly open from her last attempt to speak, looked at him with bewilderment. "I saw that face in my dream." She said. "It has begun." She turned and ran, as best she could, from the room.

"What?" Gnat yelled after her. "What has begun?" She did not answer, and he stood there a moment with the broken stool in his hand before pouring himself a drink and retiring to bed.

Chapter Six

The goat smelled like a pile of compost and hiccupped every few minutes. It was lame in the left hind leg, and when it walked, it always seemed to be falling.

Louis was mounted on the beast, a short wooden sword in his left hand and ratty leather armor loosely hanging from his shoulders. His helmet was a wooden bowl attached to his head by a thin leather strap. With his right hand he held the rope tied around the goat's neck.

"Here they come." William called softly from the side of the road. Louis was in the center. "Don't mess this up boy, or I will kill you myself." With a slight rustling of bushes, he vanished.

Louis took a deep breath. A lump had grown in his throat he could not get rid of. He swallowed, and his tongue felt dry. The horsemen were coming, four of them, trotting along at a gentle pace. Three were large men, while the one in the middle was small like Will. He wore a blue hood and held his shoulders high.

"None shall pass," Louis called as loudly as he could speak, "unless they give oath to the unparalleled beauty of my lady Roundbottom of Pigionia, the most marvelous treasure ever to grace the earth." Louis felt briefly proud of himself. It had taken three days to learn that speech, and he had been afraid he would mix the words. The horses slowed and approached at a walk.

"What is this?" One of the men said with a sneering tone in his voice. "Why boy, do you threaten us?"

"You shall not pass unless you proclaim my beloved, the lady Roundbottom of Pigionia, to be the brightest beauty in the world."

The men laughed and burst out further when Louis raised his sword in the air and puffed himself high in the chest. When the goat hiccupped at the next moment, the men fell into noiseless hysterics. A tear leaked from one eye. One man slapped the other on the arm and pointed at the scene. Another leaned against his horse's neck, his hand slapping on his thigh. Then the whiz of two arrows, and two men fell from their saddles with laughter still short upon their tongues. Before the other two could turn their startled minds to action, a second pair of arrows met their chests. William and Gnat darted from the nearby bushes and sprang onto two of the horses. After pushing two slumping figures from the saddles, they turned the horses south and headed toward Lord Simeon's castle at a gallop. Louis was left on the goat, staring at the men rolling in agony on the ground. Dusk had settled in, but he could still see the blood pouring on the road.

"I'm going to kill you rat." One of the men stammered as he raised to his knees. He managed to pull a short sword from his side before Louis leapt from the goat and ran into the woods. The man broke the arrow off near his chest and turned to his comrades. One other man was sitting up, while the others remained prostrate.

"Marcus is dead." Louis heard faintly as he stumbled through the forest. When he was sure he was beyond them, he made his way back to the road and headed towards the mining village.

Walking back in the blanketing darkness, it began to wear on him; the violence of the act. What had those men done to have arrows in their chests? It did not make sense. Nothing did. He stopped. Would he be beaten for leaving the goat behind? He took a step back. "I'm going to kill you." Surfaced in his ears. Would the man still be there? "Mess this up boy, and I will kill you myself." It seemed everyone wanted to kill him. But they got four horses, and four horses surely made up for one goat. And a wooden sword. He tossed the weapon into the woods. He left the armor on. It kept him warm, though it was heavy. For the first time he wondered what happened when men died and whether it was different than what happened to animals. He remembered a partridge William shot; the way it fell awkwardly to the ground. When he found it in the bushes,

it was covered with blood. When he pulled the arrow out, it squirted on his face. It tasted salty on his lips, warm with the waning life. Would the blood of a dying man taste the same?

It started to rain before he returned to the house. It wore the tingling chill of approaching winter. Louis' bare feet dragged in the rising mud, and he curled his hands beneath his armpits. Maybe with all the gold they would buy him a cap, he thought. Maybe even a new set of clothes or a blanket of his own so Camille could have hers back; so she did not shiver in the night with only her dress to protect her. Maybe they would give him some coins, and Camille too, so they could go to the cottage in their dreams.

When he entered the house, it felt empty. It was dark, and as he felt his way toward the barroom, he heard the scurrying of rats. Water dripped from his clothes. The drops made a thudding sound when they broke on the ground. He could hear each one. A clap of thunder broke the quiet, and then he was falling. When he landed, his feet were on something warm; something soft and familiar. He knelt beside the body and touched it gently with his hand, feeling the slender contours of the figure and the sallow face. There was blood on her throat, and his finger slipped inside the wound, to where the last breath had been cut short. He left the body and crawled in the direction of the fireplace. A low warmth met him as he neared, and when he stirred the ashes, a few glowing embers shone a dim red light on his face. He took a log from the small stack in the corner and threw it in the fireplace. He blew on the whitening charcoal, and a flame leapt from the log. Louis added two more before finally turning toward the body.

Anna's pallid face stared at him with dark, open, eyes. The shadows danced on her face. Louis lit a candle and knelt beside her. He touched her face as he had in the dark. She was colder now, like the partridge when he cleaned it in the field, like the rats when the stray cats ate them. He looked into the next room, where the girls lay at night, and shivered. The lurid scent of Jasmine drifted to his nostrils, and he became frightened.

Shaking, he stood and carefully stepped over Anna's corpse. He pulled back the curtain to Miranda's compartment. It was empty. He was disappointed, in a way. If anyone deserved to die, it was she. He flung open the next curtain. Jasmine's naked carcass lay slumped over an unknown man. Their blood mingled on the ground. Someone had left a knife in her back. Louis let the curtain fall and held the candle toward the next; Camille's. He raised his hand and then lowered it. He closed his eyes, swallowed and tried to think of the ocean, but the dream had vanished. He took hold of the fabric and closed his eyes again. The curtain opened, and he stepped inside. In the darkness of his thoughts he recalled the journey home. Many times he hid beside the road to let horsemen pass, but he remembered now one group in particular. There were five of them, and they galloped by faster than he had ever seen anything move, swords dangling at their sides. They had been here. He felt it. He opened his eyes.

He ran to the barroom with a trembling step and jumped over Anna before sitting at the nearest table with a giant smile on his face. She was not there. He began to weep and laugh sporadically, doubling over with the near grief and glancing about for someone to hug or dance.

"She's alive!" He said, jumping to his feet and spinning on one foot. "She's alive. She's alive." He repeated the words a dozen times before ceasing all motion. "But then, where is she?" He said out loud.

"God knows." William answered from the doorway to the back room. "Let's go boy, before they come back for the rest of us." He turned from Louis and lifted a pack to his shoulders. He peaked back into the room. "Well, are you coming or not?" Louis ran after him. The wind blew the rain into Louis' face, and William walked fast so he had to run half of the time to keep up.

"Who were they?" He managed to ask when they had cleared the village and William slowed his gait.

"Lord Simeon's men." William answered with unusual honesty. "They arrived shortly after we did. They would have got us all if they were a little faster. Come on now, Gnat isn't too far off. He has the horses, and the gold." He paused, and the splashing of their footsteps filled the void. "You did good tonight, by the way."

Louis looked with wide eyes at William. He seemed different. His brow wore the look of his conscience. It was fighting a battle as he walked, and as Louis glanced at him, he was at one moment terrified of the future, the next merely wary.

"We can rest here." Will said as he held a low hanging branch aside so Louis could pass. "Beneath that tree over there." He pointed to a large evergreen. They both sat down and leaned against the trunk. "Are you cold?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry." Will put his arm around Louis. "You know boy, this is no kind of life for a man. But there's no choice for us." A howl of wind interrupted. Will leaned his head on top of Louis' for a moment. "I tell you boy, this is a dangerous world. A man must take care of himself. Always. You will never get anything if you don't. You saw those men, right; the one's we shot?"

"One of them died."

"Yes, well; those men were slaves. What we took from them was not theirs. It was not anyone's. But it's mine, ours, now." A few drops of water trickled from the branches onto Louis' neck. He heard William lick his lips, and the man began to caress the child's head, petting him as if a dog. "But now, my boy, it's time." His hand gripped Louis firmly around the neck. "Don't struggle, and I think you will find you enjoy this." He pushed Louis face first into the mud. Louis struggled, but the firm grip held him down. He gasped, and his mouth filled with dirt. "I've waited a long time for this." William whispered in his ear. "And, well, this is to be my last opportunity. See, you're going away, my boy." With his free hand, William slid Louis' tunic toward his shoulders until it caught on the armor and folded it over his head. Louis flailed his arms backwards but could not reach anything but mud and pine needles. He managed a grunting wail, which died in the mud. "Hush now." William said as he raised his own tunic over Louis' back. Louis could feel the warmth of his body. It was near. Louis tried arching his back to wriggle free, and he felt William against his skin. He collapsed in the mud, giving up, attempting to drift into the fantasy of the field where Camille danced in a waving gown amongst the harvest grass and songbirds circled about her head in the golden sunlight of the dawn. He could almost feel it. Then a crashing sound, like a blunt axe on a water soaked log, and William slumped listlessly on top of him. A second thud, and Will's body shuddered. He was heavy and pressed Louis against the ground. Then he was gone, rolling like a dead rabbit from the chopping block.

"Louis." Camille's voice drifted to his ears, and for a moment he thought she had pranced into reality from his daydream. An axe handle fell on the ground beside him. It had blood on the end. His tunic was drawn once more over his legs, and then her hands grasped him beneath the chest and pulled him from the mire.

He was shivering and crying as she embraced him. Her arms were a refuge, and in her breast he discovered hope, which for a moment had nearly flickered its final flame before the wind of despair. A groan rose from William.

"It's time to run." Camille said, and rising to their feet, they set out into the shaking trees, their feet light with the downy fleece of freedom. Louis was rattled. His head felt heavy, and he thought he heard William stumbling after them. A strike of lightning showed Camille's face. She smiled. In the shifting light, she looked like a ghoul. Then they came to a clearing. Two bodies lay slumped against a fallen log, their arms clutching each other in awkward fashion.

"He killed them," she said, lifting a hand towards Gnat and Miranda, "to keep it all for himself. Then he went back for you. Now hurry." She lifted him onto one of the horses tied beside the bodies. She untied all four and mounted the secretary's horse, still burdened by the coins. They headed down a muddy path, Louis in the lead, with Camille following, leading the remaining horses by the reins. The horse was warm against Louis, and he thought of the man he had seen riding it. He was dead now, in the road. He recognized the white star on the creature's face. Vaguely he remembered riding a horse in that distant life before the fire, before the horse head peered at him. He looked back at Camille. She was wet, and when she did not know he was watching, she looked tired. When she knew, she held herself up and smiled.

When they reached the road, they let the spare horses free. The animals stood beneath the trees, close upon one another, and looked pathetic in the rain. Did they know they were free? Was it to them something to cherish, to believe in? What does the horse think when prancing proudly with the soldier on his back or eating the sweet beet from the peasant's hand? Anything? Does he feel injustice in being made to pull the burdens placed about his neck? Does he suffer any more or less than the peasant who spends his days toiling in the mines to earn that shiny coin; that shiny coin which this week never did arrive? Is a hungry horse any more hungry than a hungry man? Enough. Enough. The horse cannot say. The man may speak, but what truly can he impart? Is the anger of a murderous thief at the loss of his prize any less real than the anger of the noble man whom he robbed or the laborer who lost his wage? And the dead man, should he not be the most angry? He was a passing character in the history of this narrative, but a real man who dreamed and knelt before the Cross to ask for blessings in this life, not only for himself but his child and beloved spouse. He awakened each morning and opened his eyes. The same as everyone who has ever been alive. He ate with a tongue and teeth no less

real than the greatest king or reprobate. He felt his heart, and it beat. Thump. Thump. It beat the blood through his veins. The same blood in your veins. Yes, in yours, and your neighbor's, and your enemies'. His fingertips felt the same sensations. He knew what it was to feel a kiss on his cheek and have his grandmother run her fingers playfully across his hair. He remembered chasing a kitten through the trees and finding a bird nest on the ground. Three of the eggs were broken, but a fourth he saved and tried desperately to raise the bird which hatched. But it would not eat the food he offered, and his mother made him bury it outside when it died. And he cried. It did not bring the bird back. His wife cried. It did not bring him back. This nameless, faceless, man who died transporting gold coins along a road which has long since overgrown with weeds and trees, from one forgotten castle to a small, unimportant, town. He was no one. His name appears nowhere. In no history book. In no memoir. In no memory. Why, it is almost as if he never did exist. But there were days he breathed. He felt the sunshine. He was. That cannot be taken away.

Chapter Seven

Starface, as Louis dubbed his horse, was wearied greatly. His last companion was set free with a lame hoof after only a few days, and he took on the added weight of Camille and the gold. "It's for the best, anyway." Camille said when they left the horse. "We will draw less suspicion with only one horse. We need to get rid of the saddlebags too, and maybe the saddle. It's no good for raggedy folk like us to ride around on such a fine horse. And us, a woman and a child. No one but the poor travel in such groups."

In a little town she bought four sacks. They filled the bottoms with gold and covered the coins with food, utensils, blankets and clothes. They replaced the saddle with two woolen blankets. After they washed in a small stream, they put on new clothes. "Now, look at you." Camille told Louis. "You look like any old village boy." Louis told Camille she looked nice, but really he was thinking of how skinny she was when she was naked in the stream. Her ribs stuck out like a starving dog, and her skin was blotched with yellow. The chasms at either side of her neck made her shoulder bones protrude like horns, and her legs had the appearance of brittle sticks. When she put her dress on and tied her hair back in a ribbon, she looked faded, gray. She smiled and twirled in the sunshine. Then she coughed violently for a few minutes, and when she was done she tried to wipe the blood on the grass before Louis noticed. "I'll be okay." She said, trying to smile. "The rainstorm took a bit out of me, but I'll be fine. My, you look nice all cleaned up, don't you? Why don't we eat?"

They sat in the grass and lunched on bread, cheese and olives. Camille, exhausted, fell asleep, and Louis walked over to Starface grazing beneath a nearby tree. He touched the horse's head, and Starface pushed against him with his face. His whiskers tickled against Louis' cheek and made him laugh. The horse stomped on the ground with his hoof. Louis rustled the rough hair of his mane, and Starface nudged Louis with his nose, knocking the boy, laughing, to the ground. The horse ran a few feet away and whinnied. He shook his head. A dozen flies darted off. Louis rolled onto his stomach and buried his face in the grass. After a moment he felt the tickle of horse whiskers on his ear, and the rotten smell of half digested grass filled his nostrils. Starface licked the back of his head, and for a moment Louis thought he was going to eat his hair. "Nooo!" He said giggling while he rolled over again and put his hands over his face. The horse ran off again to whinny and stomp his feet. The boy put his hands behind his head and looked at him. Then he looked at Camille, and the smile died on his lips. She was shivering so violently her body would rise off the ground. She groaned and waved her arms, saying, "I don't want to anymore," and "leave me alone." Louis moved closer and watched her eyes quiver beneath their lids. Sweat was forming at her hairline, and as Louis placed his palm over her forehead, he was surprised by the chill of her skin. She lurched. Her fingers clutched his tunic, and she pulled him close in her sleep. She was panting, and Louis could feel her breath on his face. A tear ran down her left cheek and glistened in the sun.

Camille's grasp on his tunic loosened. Her back arched off the ground. Her jaw moved awkwardly like she was choking or trying to eat something too big. "Camille." Louis whispered. "Wake up." He shook her by the shoulder. Even through the cloth he could feel the clamminess of her skin. She turned from side to side, her head thrashing against the ground. Louis took her in his arms. Her arms hung at her side. "Please wake up." He pleaded. He shook her. A small murmur rose and died deep in her chest. Her head fell forward against his.

A lock of her hair, having freed itself from the ribbon, fell between them and hung in front of his eyes. He brushed it back with his right hand. Her eyelids opened, and he was looking into her eyes. Her pupils danced like waves around the edge of her eyes, and then they centered and she opened her eyes wide. She was looking somewhere else, beyond his face. Her body no longer trembled. She was at peace, and her breath was faint. Then a gentle smile on her face, and she looked at Louis. He smiled back, but his eyes were turning down, the corners beginning to leak. Then she was heavy, and he lay her on the ground. Her eyes stared at the blue sky, and he wondered if she could see. He kissed her on the lips and stood. Starface nuzzled him from behind and placed his head on his shoulder. Louis hugged his nose and wept.

Chapter Eight

"I wanted her to be my mother." Louis told Mirabel. Then he was silent for a time. Mirabel's arm was around his shoulder, and he leaned against her with a sigh. "She was the last person to be nice to me. I've been alone ever since."

"But not anymore, right?" Mirabel said with a reassuring smile. Louis nodded his head. "Do you want to stop?"

"No, it's okay." He looked at his hands, which were turning a corner of the blanket into a little ball. "I just miss her."

"I'm sure you do. But I'm sure she's in Heaven now."

"Heaven?"

"With God." Louis seemed confused. Mirabel patted him on the hand. "You've never learned about God have you?"

"No."

"Do you know who Jesus is?" He shook his head to the side.

"Well, we will have time for that later. But it is very important that you know Jesus is the Son of God and that He came to this earth as a man to die for all of our sins. And most importantly, that He loves you more than anyone else."

"Is that Him?" Louis pointed to the Crucifix.

"Yes."

"He looks in pain."

"Yes, He went through great pain for all of us; so that we might live."

"Was He happy, before that?"

"Yes, I'm sure He was. God must be happy I suppose. Except maybe when He thinks of us. Then, maybe, He is sad. I don't know. God is beyond us to know. But you do not need to know Him to know He loves you or to have faith in Him."

"And He loves even me?"

"Yes."

"And where is He?"

"In Heaven. Paradise. We shall all go there someday, except the very worst people."

"Will William be there?"

"Only if he changes. God gives everyone a second chance."

"I don't want him to be there if Camille is there."

"Oh Louis, never wish anyone not to go to Heaven. Instead you should pray they repent their sins and become good so that they deserve to go to Heaven. Pray that God helps them."

"What is pray?"

"Prayer is when you speak to God, or Jesus, either in your own head or out loud. You can ask Him for help, thank Him for things and generally just pour your heart out to Him. You can tell Him things you would never tell anyone else, because He already knows. He knows everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes. So He knows everything that has happened to you and that will happen to you. So when you need someone to help guide you, He is always there and will always understand."

"And when people die, they go to Him, in Heaven?"

"Yes. Either they go directly to Him or they will go to Him when Jesus returns."

"Is He coming soon?"

"Surely. It has been more than eight hundred years since He gave His life and returned to His Father. He is said to be coming soon. Then we will all be with Him."

"And Camille?"

"Yes, I'm sure you can see her then. See Louis, dying is not something to fear. We all have to die eventually. But the Lord has promised us that this death is not the end. We will live again. And when we do, it will be in a wondrous place, more beautiful and free than any place you have ever been or can imagine. This is God's promise to us." Mirabel glowed as the words passed her lips. "See Louis, no matter what happens to you, you must know that in the end everything will turn out right."

"Will Starface be in Heaven?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised. After all, he was a good horse, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"What happened to him?"

"Someone stole him. And the coins."

"Well, you stole them too, right? So they were not really yours to begin with, were they?"

"No."

"Still, it's unfortunate." She stared blankly at the wall for a moment. "What did you do after the horse was stolen?"

"I walked and walked. My new clothes got dirty. And I was hungry all the time."

"Were those the clothes you were wearing when you came here?"

"Yes."

"And it's been years. My." She squeezed his shoulders. "That's enough for now. I have to go. Try to rest."

After she left, Louis closed his eyes and drifted back to the field where Camille died. When he knew she was gone, he covered her with a blanket and gathered two handfuls of white flowers he found at the water's edge. He lay them on her chest.

He spent three days there, guarding over her, sleeping at her side and trying not to forget. But he did, at times. When he left the flowers had wilted.

Unable to mount by himself, Louis led Starface by a rope toward the sea. He hoped to find the field of Camille's dreams. A few days into his journey, however, a loud whiney awakened him, followed by the sound of a man's voice. By the time Louis was on his feet Starface, with all his belongings save a single blanket, was being led away at a trot between two mules. He ran after them a short distance before being resigned to accept his loss.

So he wandered. He ate and slept chaotically. His clothes became soiled. Sometimes he would beg or offer to work for food. Too often he met no response.

In one town he thought he saw William. He ran until he was hidden behind a stone wall at the outskirts of town, drawing exhausted breath after breath into his weary lungs. He had not eaten in two days, but he waited until night before moving just to make sure William had not followed him. The moss on the stone wall was wet, and the moisture soaked through his tunic. Three days later he lay in a hay field delirious with fever. In the time between he had managed to beg a small loaf of bread and wrest a bone from a little dog that still had a small amount of meat on it. He suckled the bone in a tree after the dog chased him nearly half a mile from its house.

Louis often coughed when he had the fever and kept expecting to find blood and then die. A farmer discovered him the second day, and after attempting to wake him, carried him to his cottage and lay him in his bed. Louis awakened delirious and thought he was in the brothel and William would be coming to kill him at any moment. He ran from the house, stumbling through the fields until he entered a small grove of trees and collapsed. Faintly he heard the farmer calling, "boy, oh boy!" Louis was silent and the farmer returned to his house shaking his head, a bucket of milk in his hand he had planned to share with Louis. But he had done

enough, at least to keep Louis alive. The bowl of soup he spoon-fed the child the night before would nourish him through his illness. Though he would grow rigid and thin as the years passed, Louis would not come so close to death as that.

It would be useless, and impossible, to relate the daily trials he endured. Unless someone has endured hunger, it cannot be accurately understood. None but the loneliest of creatures can know the affect of isolation such as he knew. What words may truly describe the feel of winter or the continual unnerving presence of darkness night after night, year after year? Stories gloss over lifetimes and events, but reality unfolds second by second. To state that Louis did not have a restful night sleep for more than five years is a casual statement of words. The reality is that moment by moment, whether in a ditch, some stranger's barn or a niche in the woods, his senses never fully gave way to slumber. He could always feel the outside world. And nearly every waking moment was spent in pursuit of something, whether it be a morsel of food, cover from the rain or place to safely lay his head in the sand.

It would be much easier to write about the nobleman's fine clothes, describing in rich detail the exquisite fabric and stitching exhibited in his gown, or to transcribe the glorious dates and names of battles and generals. Volumes could be filled, and have been, with weaponry, cultures and general practices of any year in any place in the world. Lighten up, one might say. No one wants to read about a suffering child, page after page. We get the point. He was abandoned. He was poor. But do you understand? Can you feel the numbness of his fingertips as he curled his arms around his knees and lay his head against a tree and stared at the interweaving maze of tree branches which separated him from a collection of huts which formed a village of happy, or at least reasonably happy, individuals all well fed, warm and occupied with dreams? Can you know that feeling? Of course, you don't want to. No one does. But if you can ignore it and read about the princess and the prince, their romantic dance, then you will feel good and dream about yourself in their shoes. Everyone wants to be rich. Everyone wants to be comfortable and free. Have you ever wanted a handful of beans or a single slice of bread? Have you ever clutched a stale block of cheese like it was a feast? Think of all the meals you have eaten in your life; could any compare to a handful of berries picked from a wild bush after a week of surviving on chestnuts and beetles? Does it bother you to think of such things? Does it bother you a writer would interrupt a story which as yet seems a little meandering and pointless to ask you point blank: do you ever think about anyone else or consider how your actions affect the rest of the residents of earth? Of course not. Flip on the television (oh, damn the present for intruding into 865 a.d.) or the radio. Throw away this cursed book and forget the fact that every person to have ever lived has been capable the same as you of suffering, happiness and death. Forget to think. 'Tis the fashion of the human being. Go to the store. Buy some new things. Place them on the altar of yourself and gorge upon the bones of mass media fueled desire. Be the typical human being. Breathe. Laugh. Dance with the mirage of sanity and pretend to love the one beside you the same way you love yourself. Here, have my life. Honestly, I think you might use it better. I have no use for it, because all I ever do is frustrate myself by believing there is a higher purpose to life. I fail at understanding. I abandon the child the same as anyone. I close my eyes. There I am walking down the road with my basket full of vegetables on my back. I hear a murmur to the side, by a gathering of bushes up ahead. I nod by and ignore the child trying to hide his hunger in the belly of the branches. My eyes avoid his, because if I look him in the eyes, then I must acknowledge his existence and I might feel pity. But no, if I do not look him in the eyes, he does not exist. Maybe I'll tell my neighbor about him and say something like, "I felt bad when I saw him, but what could I do, I've barely got enough food for me and my wife." And my neighbor will nod and say, "Aye." Then, I'll say, "if I didn't have to pay lord such-and-such for use of the land, then I would have helped him." And I'll think, it's not my problem. It is the state's. I take care of myself. It's up to everyone else to take care of themselves. After all, the strong survive. Only the strong and the rich. Only the strong, the rich and protected, or the odd needy person who catches the rich man in the eye or becomes the symbol for the overflowing humanitarian need which helps one out of every hundred poor created by the merchant and governmental superiors which feel quite fine about themselves for handing over .001 percent of their pay to the cause. "We built five houses for the poor!" Please ignore the thousand we ransacked to finance our war. Damn it, I give my church a nickel of every dollar I earn. What more could God expect of me? I'm a good man. Really I am. My wife is a good woman. My children are good children. We suffer too, you know. My daughter died from the plague. So did one of my servants. It was a pain to replace him. A good man. Worked hard for me for eighteen years. Oh, he had a daughter of his own? I never knew. What happened to her I wonder? A prostitute? Surely

you exaggerate. If she would have come to me, surely I would have helped. She had to know this. Surely her father told his family what a good man I am. She could have milked our cows, or helped keep the household. What's that you say: what about her own life, her own dreams? Really, I'm a charitable man, but I can only offer so much. It is a fair exchange after all. She works and in exchange she gets food and a place to sleep. I work. That's all I get, in the long run of things. That's all any of us gets. Just some work provides a little better than others. Who decided which occupations deserve higher compensation? Really, that is an asinine question. No one decided. It just sort of happened. You know, supply and demand. Education. Educated people get more. Sometimes. Well, I mean, really, who's going to give a bricklayer as much as a banker? Who can compare constructing a legitimate place for someone to live to transferring and reusing other people's artificially created coupons for services supposedly rendered under an equal transfer of goods or services? Yes, I truly believe some people's time is worth more than others. No, I have never considered that, if the time was viewed as their own, everyone is giving up an equivalent amount of freedom to provide for themselves. Come on now, back to the course of things. Reality. Things are the way they are. People are not equal. Not today. Not in 865. Not ever. The future? Not a chance.

So, it shall be suffice to repeat that Louis survived, somehow, from the time of Camille's death until he sought to "steal" the fruit from the nunnery. Anything more would require ability beyond that of this writer: the ability to place memory and feeling accurately into word.

Chapter Nine

Mirabel and Louis caught a ride with a woodsman carting a load of firewood to Lord Simeon's castle. "Good day sister." He said as he slowed beside them. They were walking hand in hand, just leaving the town. The fortress was about a quarter of a mile beyond. "Fancy a lift?"

"Thank you." Mirabel made a small bow of gratitude, and she and Louis clambered up beside the woodsman. The pile of wood creaked as the oxen pushed forward.

"Fine day, isn't it?" The woodsman said loudly.

"Oh yes."

"What brings you up to the old castle?"

"I'm taking my young friend here to see Lord Samson."

"Quite a gentleman, that Samson. I've never thought much of noblemen myself; a greedy bunch, you know; but Lord Samson, he seems like a fine man. He even helped me unload my cart one time. Talked to me like a man, mind you. Not like half the damn, excuse the language sister, lackeys in the place. He's put some in his place though, since he got back."

"Where was he?"

"Don't you know? His ship went down a ways back. Everyone thought he was dead. Then a few months ago; poof, he appears out of nowhere with a stranger, the two of them raggedy as anything, but alive. I heard they were stranded on an island that whole time, just the two of them. The stranger saved his life, I heard. But he didn't spend one night here. Octavio, a friend of mine whose son is a page in Lord Simeon's court, said the stranger was introduced to Lord Simeon, looked him in the eye and told Samson, not my lord, that he, though he loved Samson as a brother, could not spend one night beneath the roof of the man that burned his village to the ground and ordered the slaughter of his family. Then, with the court in silence, he turned and left the room. Imagine that. Quite shocking really. Anyway, here we are sister. You'll want the door over there to the left of the main doors. I've got to go around to the side myself."

"Thank you for your kindness. It's very Christian of you."

"My pleasure sister."

The cart rattled off and left Mirabel and Louis staring at the imposing mansion. They were inside the outer wall, in the lane leading from the main gate to the steps descending from the large double doors through which Mirabel remembered entering with her parents. Now, a lowly nun, she led Louis to the side door used by the culturally insignificant. The guard outside looked at the pair with diffidence. "May I help you sister?"

"Yes, I have been sent by mother Miriam to speak with Lord Samson."

The guard ran his eyes over Louis and turned to knock on the door. A slit opened in the middle of the door, and a man's face peered out. "Open the door Paul. A nun and a child to see Lord Samson." The two men shared a short smile before the door swung open. "Good luck." The guard said as they entered a long hallway.

"Follow me." A page said as they passed the interior guard. He was a few years older than Louis and carried himself with an air of importance. The hallway was dim, and Louis held Mirabel's hand tightly. She squeezed it. Her heart pounded nervously, and in the dark places between the torches, ghosts of her past life sprang up. She saw Samson laughing, promising he would write to her when he was gone. She saw herself lying in her bed, weeping, as month after month the messengers failed to come. Then her father kneeling beside her with the news of his death. She wept in his arms and felt betrayed. So she took solace in her faith. "Please wait here." The page told them as they entered a small room. There were half a dozen chairs and tapestries on the wall depicting hunting scenes. A small fire glowed in the fireplace, and a window illuminated the room. They seated themselves on the uncomfortable wooden chairs while the page disappeared through a second door. Mirabel and Louis looked at each other and smiled meekly.

Louis marveled at the extravagance of the room, though it was, aside from the servant's quarters, the most bare in the entire castle. Above the fireplace hung two swords crossed near the hilts with a hog's head between, its large tusks lowered menacingly at the visitors. The tapestries were blue, green and gold in color and, aside from the usual deer and fowl, depicted two giant dragons being slain by a handful of huntsmen. A door opened behind them. A secretary entered.

"Sister, welcome to castle di Gregoire. How may I help you?"

"Mother Miriam sent me to speak to Lord Samson."

"Hmmm. And what business have you to discuss? It is about this child, I presume." He glanced over Louis with a haughty sweep of the eyes. He smiled the entire time he spoke, but it was false, and he held his hand a little in the air, as if it would be bad to let it touch his side.

"Yes, it is."

"Let me guess, you wish to enroll him in our staff here."

"Yes, but..."

"Now, sister, you know Lord Samson is a busy man, and he does not deal with such matters himself."

"But the mother superior told me."

"Yes, I am afraid she misinformed you. I am sorry, but if you leave the child's name, I will see if we have any available posts. If we do, I will send word to mother Miriam."

"But, if I could just speak with Lord Samson, it would only take a few minutes. Surely, if you would just ask, he would see me. He has a good heart."

"Yes, indeed. Perhaps I can speak to him this evening about it, and then, if he agrees to see you, I will send a messenger to the nunnery to let you know when to come. But I cannot promise anything."

"But..."

"Sister, I pray you understand. If you were not of the cloth, I would not do even that. Otherwise we would have every peasant woman parading their children here in hopes of finding them a position, which we simply do not have. Please, sister, understand my position."

"Duncan, you are such a prat." Mirabel froze at the sound of Samson's voice. Her back was facing him, and as he addressed her, he, obviously, did not recognize her. "I will be glad to speak with the sister. Now, Duncan, if you would be so kind, run off to your precious duties, and while you are on your way, send some refreshments down. This child looks famished." He smiled at Louis, who had turned in his chair to stare at the handsome young man. Louis smiled quickly in return before turning toward Mirabel. Her face was like stone, and as he was close beside her, he could feel the quivering in her arm. "Now Duncan." Samson said sternly, and the secretary left the room in haste, carefully closing the door behind him. "I apologize. He was just doing what he thinks he's supposed to do: protecting my 'precious' time. Now, sister, how can I help you? I..." Silence swallowed him as Mirabel stood and turned toward him. His mouth remained half open, and his eyes were stilled with astonishment. He looked older, leaner, than Mirabel remembered, but though his eyes bore a grayness earned through experience, the sparkle of life which first marked his countenance was undeniably the same. She, even in the habit of the nunnery, was more beautiful than the memory of the sixteen year old girl which had forestalled the infringing embrace of insanity all those months he had spent abandoned by humanity. His knees buckled with faintness, and as he caught himself by the hand on the back of a chair, Mirabel let out a

short gasp and ran to him. Tearfully they embraced. Louis, watching, was touched, though confused. The emotion filled the room so strongly he could not help but feel sad, or overjoyed. He was not sure. It was quite unexpected to see the two of them standing there: a bearded stranger's face resting over Mirabel's shoulder with tears spilling from his shut eyes and a peculiar half smile on his face. His arms were around her, and Louis could see the rings on his fingers. He wore a green cap, and the sleeves wrapped around Mirabel's gown were the matching color, except where lined with gold. They just stood there, holding each other, so eventually Louis turned to the window and watched a raven pass. The thudding of its wings was so loud it sounded like it was in the room. Louis looked at the hog's head and began to remember the time such a creature charged after him, but he was interrupted by Mirabel's voice.

"I thought you were dead."

"Yes." A long pause, indicative of an indescribable silent exchange of lost dreams and new hopes. "I should have been." Another deep pause, and Louis turned to them. They were seated now, behind him, holding hands and looking each other in the eyes. "You are more beautiful than I remembered." She lowered her eyes to their united hands and then returned them to his gaze.

"Tell me." She said softly. "Everything that happened. Tell me what kept you from coming. I waited, every day," she was crying again, "for word from you. Then they told me you were dead. And now? I don't know what to think. Why didn't you find me out? I've been so alone." She leaned against his shoulder, and he kissed her on top of the head.

"I did not know if you would remember me."

"Always."

"I know now. I shall always know, but when I wrote your father, he told me you had betrothed yourself to Christ, and I did not know what to do. But, I swear to you, if I had know you were here, in my own town, I would have come to you at once. I just did not know where you were or if you would want to see me."

"And now?"

"I will not lose you again."

"Nor I you." She leaned back on her chair. He raised her hands to his lips. "You can't do that: I'm a nun." She smiled.

"Shall you always be?"

"We shall see." She allowed herself a glowing half smile. "But now, tell me what happened."

Part Two

Chapter Ten

In the year eight hundred sixty-three, anno Domini, the world was full of change, as truly every year since the first, whenever that was, has been. In China, the Tang dynasty was showing signs of its demise, though it would hold onto its fading luxury for some four decades hence. The people lived virtually the same as they always had and seemingly always would, seeking out meager existence while the Confucian royalty, the courtiers, lived proudly and well fed. Buddhism was the favorite of the court, though for many it was enough to take an hour to relax with the family and watch the sunset across the desert or rolling fields of rice. Many were the caravans dashing across the vast realm and off to India, Persia or the plains of middle Asia where horsemen flourished and Mohammed was held next to God. But to the north, as in so many other eras, the border was fluid with the warring of nomadic tribes. In the unknown Americas many people flourished, gained fame and power which in years since have been lost to the strands of human knowledge. They fought wars, sought peace and worshipped gods the same as any other culture. Their individuals knew fear, privation, glory, joy and festivity, each in turn, as have all who have lived. In Europe, the Vikings of Denmark and Norway sailed in their ships and struck out across the Russian plains to establish themselves. Kings lived and died. Hearts were broken and children bred with glee.

And in Italy, many years after their armies first disembarked on the heel of the peninsula, the Saracens were nudging gradually north. Young men struggled at each others' throats in Sicily, Naples and a hundred nameless fields of war. Fiercely they sought to prolong their lives, or at least lay them down for such a noble cause as faith, king or the few coins and a daily. Young nobles went off to teeth upon the tit of war; to become men, or dead, in the classroom of struggle that their fathers' memories never did quite accurately depict. It was not quite so fine as imagined to ride for weeks to arrive near enough the front to find someone to tell them where to fight or to deal with the fighting men, whom often, especially when drunk, were as eager to fight one another as the most worthy foe. The legends dropped by the mouth of the father could not bring life to the fear, the overwhelming sense of mortality which blossoms on the eve of battle or the disillusion that sparks in the heart as one stands amongst the congregation of warriors and looks about to realize that in a few hours a certain number, whether large or small, of these men shall breathe no longer, and that, perhaps, your own soul could be among those set free. When you played with your brother, and he stabbed you in the heart with a stick, it was fun to die, to fall on the ground and rattle off an exaggerated lament. But then you could stand back up again, and there was no blood.

God, what a heavy weight it is to lead, to stand up and tell your men the cause is right and they are heroes, when in your own heart there is doubt so overwhelming you keep thinking about how nice it would be to be at home by the fire with your dogs and familiar servants, even if you had to hear your father call you a coward a thousand times a day for the rest of your life. But then it starts. Lines of men move forward, swords and shield in hand, or at least a scythe or pitchfork, and the motion is beautiful. Like waves crashing against the shore, the lines meet and there are screams, the smell of sweat and blood, the taste of chaos. Then you're in it, and it is all so fast you do not think. You cannot conceptualize these as men. They are death. They are sin. Everything adverse to you: that is him, the man before you brandishing a sword, gashing your horse's leg, twisting you to the ground. He is at you now, this thing, this powerful beast whose blows shiver down your sword to your very bones. You cannot defeat him. No, he is too strong, overpowering as he stands above you swinging, always swinging, that terrible piece of steel, and you seem so very slow as you combat each stroke. Then he stops, looks at the sky and lunges forward to fall at your feet. You stare a moment at the soldier whose blade is dripping with his blood, and then you turn to meet a new attack. This man is not so strong, but there is a trembling at your feet, and you can hear the gasping of the first as he bleeds and writhes with the expiring hopes which once plagued his dreams. He is a man now, dying an unfortunate death, thinking, perhaps, of a daughter, or his dogs by the fireplace. Your foot brushes against him as you fend off an attack. Already he is stiff. You want to look down, but then, you would lay beside him. You too would be stiff. And it is better to be alive than that. Then it happens. Your blade slips into the creature's throat. You tug on your sword, but it does not loose. You kick the body off, and as he falls, he too is momentarily a man. You see his face. It does not seem angry or surprised. It just looks empty.

You will remember that face later on, that first tally on your death-stick, but not now. There is another fight, another creature-man-empty-being you know not how to describe. And after him, there shall be more: a myriad of trials cast tail to nose until enough have died to warrant peace; until the snip of land has been conquered or defended, the sun goes down, or simply, everyone else is dead. Then you will stand back and feel alive, breathe in the filthy fresh air of the field and understand what your father talked about. This moment, this relief, beautiful and pure; this is the greatness of battle. To look around and know you, unlike all those dead and dying, defended yourself from all sides and defeated the grasping claws of death. Then you look at the faces beside you, and you realize there are not so many as there were before, and you search out your friends and comrades and find some standing, some bleeding and others gone. It is a little different then, when the ones you know have fallen. Still, they died like men. No doubt of that. And you shall always honor them for that and hope to die so well. Then the night comes, and your dreams are peaceful. You are home with your dogs, by the fire, a pretty maiden on your knee who smiles when you tell her you are a king and would she like to be your queen. Then she is hacked down by an axe, and the room dissolves to a moonlit forest where countless warriors maul each other senselessly but do not die or bleed. Then someone stabs you in the leg, and you awake and your leg hurts and you remember the real battle when the steel bit your flesh.

At any rate, Samson, firstborn son of the Count di Gregoire, answered the call of conquest and embarked to the south with a company of three score of his father's finest men.

Chapter Eleven

The sparrow in the olive tree cocked his head when the door opened, but it did not fly away. Samson turned momentarily from the window and put his finger to his lips to silence the entering squire. He refocused on the sparrow. It had its beak beneath its wing and was biting or cleaning itself with a series of quick pecks and bobs. It fluttered its wings and shook its neck. A spot of sunlight broke through the gently waving leaves and danced on its breast. Once it seemed to pause about a brown spot on the white chest. It looked to Samson like a glowing eyeball. He chuckled at the thought, and the sparrow buckled its knees, raised up on its toes and took flight. Samson watched until it was out of sight and then turned to the squire.

"Yes, Marcus?"

"The ship will be sailing tomorrow morning as planned, my lord."

"Good. Pass word to the men."

"Giuseppe is doing that now, sir."

"Good." Samson motioned for Marcus to sit beside him. "Tell me Marcus, why are you here; I mean why are you going to fight the Mussulman?"

"I will go wherever you lead, my lord."

"Thank you, but I'm not asking about that. Do you want to fight?"

"Honestly sir?"

"Yes."

"The thought of battle frightens me."

"But you go nonetheless."

"It is my duty. How can I be a man if I do not?"

"Is that what it is to be a man: to fight?"

"To be brave and honorable sir."

"Like your father was?"

"Yes, and like your father is."

"I wonder though, Marcus, should we want to be like them? And more importantly, should we want our sons to be like us?"

"I don't quite understand sir."

"Should we not attempt to live better lives than our fathers and our sons attempt to live better lives than us? I guess what I am getting at is that, perhaps there does not need to be war."

"But if we do not fight, we will be overrun."

"And that is why we do fight, but I cannot help to imagine there will someday be a final war. Eventually, whoever wins, everyone must grow weary of battle, mustn't they?"

"There are always new men growing of age sir. There are always those willing to pay for conquest."

"You are too reasonable Marcus. Allow me my dreams." Samson smiled, though there was a hint of disillusionment in his eyes. "I would like to believe that in the years to come the wars will cease and the men of this kingdom, of all kingdoms, might live in peace."

"Nonetheless, you fight."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"The same reasons as you, I guess. It is expected of us. Honestly, I don't know."

"I think," Marcus said after a moment of silence, "it is in the nature of man to defend himself."

"I agree, but it must also be in his nature to instigate. How else would wars happen? If it was only in our nature to defend, no one would ever strike the first blow."

"Which means what?"

"We are all capable of beginning a fight, even those that never do. It is no different than the sparrows. Generally they go about peacefully searching for food, but throw a handful of crumbs on the ground and they will steal and bicker over every grain."

"Surely we are not the same as they."

"Of course not in full, but portions of our character certainly are like the remainder of God's beasts."

"Still, we are men. They are beasts. We have in us the breath of God."

"And they are His thought."

"Which means?"

"I don't know. I think that we are the same in some ways, but we as men have the ability to be more like God than any creature. We alone, perhaps, have the potential to rise above the bitter roots of our nature and truly know what the mythical name of peace represents. It does not mean we ever will, mind you, but I think we have the potential for it." Samson shifted in his chair, looking away from Marcus. "I also think, in the right circumstances, any man might begin, wars or otherwise, what, to others, seems unjustified. In their eyes, however, they must feel they are right, or at least not in the wrong. I cannot believe anyone could do what is wrong knowing it is wrong."

"But what is wrong?"

"That generally depends on faith. The morality of true Christianity varies from the other sects, and the Arabs and Pagans have different ideals."

"Surely our way is right."

"I would like to believe so, but I have witnessed and heard of acts by solid Christians more despicable than anything the Saracens have done. Honestly, irregardless of the moral system they exist in, I think there will always be individuals which uphold goodness and those who live continually gowned in sin."

"Do you think we are right?"

"To defend ourselves?"

"In our belief in Christ?"

"You mean, should we bear allegiance to the pope in Rome or the patriarch in Constantinople?"

"Yes."

"The pope is near. The patriarch is far. It would be foolish to deny one so powerful and close."

"So you align with Rome for politics, not belief."

"Few men have such true belief as to endanger themselves, especially amongst the noble classes."

"And you do not?"

"No. I have faith in Christ, but honestly, no church. I am unsure, though, whether that is wrong. The bible is not so precise on some things. But it seems we were given minds in order that we might use them, not bind them in orthodoxy."

"You have read the bible sir?"

"Yes."

"I should like to."

"So read it. I will lend you my copy."

"I cannot read sir, not the old Latin. I mean, I get a sense of what it says, but that is all. I want to fully understand."

"There are none in the common tongue?"

"No sir."

"Well..." there was a loud knock at the door. "Enter! Ah, Giuseppe, how are you?"

"Very well, my lord." Giuseppe was a stout man with a long black beard and eyes like a wolf. At his full height he reached Samson's shoulders, but his hands dwarfed those of the nobleman. He loved to fight, whether in battle, pub or feat of arms. And while it could not be said that he often lost, his face wore the marks of a lifetime of violence and drink.

"Please, sit." Samson said, motioning to a bench beside him.

"Thank you, my lord." Giuseppe's voice was baritone, loud. Even in the din of battle he was capable of calling out commands to his men.

"How are the men?"

"Anxious, my lord. We've been in Genoa too long."

"Has there been trouble?"

"No, nothing out of the ordinary, sir. A few scuffles, but everyone is ready to sail."

"Were you involved?"

"Well, sir, I feel it is my obligation to be there for my men, whenever they are in need."

"Very noble of you Giuseppe."

"Thank you sir. Now, the fact being a few of our boys got into it with a couple of fellows from Rome. I must admit I took a bit of pleasure in helping our lads diffuse the situation." Giuseppe's face was lit with a giant smile, and Samson shook his head with bemusement. "Hard heads, those Romans." Giuseppe shook his hand. There were fresh cuts on the scarred and knobby knuckles.

"Aren't you getting a bit old for carrying on like that?" Marcus asked good-naturedly.

"In the thirty-eight years I reckon I've been blessed enough to be alive, only two men have ever had the best of me. One was my own father. The other was my Lord Simeon. Until there is a third, I shall fear no man."

"When did you fight my father?"

"Oh, it was many years ago, when I was as young as you are now. Your father would go out dressed as a commoner and ask people what they thought of his father, your grandfather, and himself. He came into a roadhouse, and after a few drinks, he starts badmouthing your grandfather. I stick up for him and tell your father to shut his yap or I will shut it for him, because no one talks about Lord Stephen like that around me and gets away with it. 'Damn you and your precious count,' he says, and I hit him square in the jaw. Most men would have been on the floor the way I hit him, but not your father. It stunned him though, for a moment. Then we went at it. Lord, your father can beat a man. It took him awhile though, and I would be lying if I said he didn't come out of it with a few bruises himself. But he got me good, up under the jaw a couple of times and laid me out cold. When I came to the roadhouse was a mess, and your father was sitting at a table with two ales beside him. 'Come here friend.' He said. 'Drink with me and promise to fight for me as you have fought for my father's name.' Then I knew it was him, and I knew any man that could whip me deserved not only my respect but my service. I have been with him ever since."

Chapter Twelve

The amber lines of dawn were still fading in the east as the company marched toward the waterfront. Genoa had yet to fully wake, though a few urchins crept from their holes to watch the soldiers pass. The footsteps echoed along the stone streets and homes, along with the familiar clip-clop of a half a dozen horses.

"A fine day for sailing." Giuseppe remarked. He rode to the left of Samson, while Marcus lingered to his left. They were approaching the water, and Marcus rode ahead to the waiting captain.

"Captain Lugosi," he said when the company had arrived, "may I present my Lord Samson, Viscount of Qoh, son of the Count di Gregoire."

"A pleasure, my lord." The captain said with a short bow.

"Likewise. Are we all set?"

"Yes sir. We loaded the last of your provisions just ten minutes ago. Once you and your men are on board, we can set sail."

"Good. Giuseppe, board the men."

"Yes sir."

"My lord, if you would be so kind, we need to get the horses settled straight away." The captain said.

"Of course." Samson and Marcus dismounted. "And which ship shall I board?"

"If you will follow me, my lord, I will show you to your tent. I'm afraid it's not much, but it's the best place on any of the three ships."

"Thank you." Samson motioned with his hand for the captain to lead the way, and they headed down the dock to the largest of the vessels. The planks creaked as they stepped onboard, and the busy crew barely glanced at them.

The Griffin was a seventy foot merchant vessel. Traveling with Samson's men were a handful of other passengers, most of whom were headed to Rome on pilgrimage or to enlist in the armies of the papal states. Only a handful of these travelers were on the Griffin.

"We asked that the viscount travel with only our men." Giuseppe said on seeing four men and a woman sitting on deck, surrounded by a few bags and blankets, obviously set in for the voyage. These others can travel on one of the other ships."

"I'm afraid they must ride on the Griffin. They are headed to Athens, and the other two ships are returning to Genoa after we reach Rome."

"Can't they ride one of the others to Rome and then transfer to this ship?"

"It is possible, but the Griffin is a faster vessel. It may arrive a day sooner than the other ships. It will take less than a day to pick up my cargo and head to Athens. I cannot afford to wait for the other ships to arrive, especially if they get slowed up at all."

"It was part of our agreement."

"Enough Giuseppe." Samson interrupted. "They'll do no harm."

"Yes my lord." Giuseppe answered with his jaw set in disagreement. As the captain led Samson and Marcus to Samson's tent, he approached the strangers. "Good day folks." He said as pleasantly as he could muster.

"Good morrow." An older man answered. His words flowed with a thick Greek accent.

"As it seems we will be sharing this voyage, I would like to ask you to stay away from the tent and, when he is on deck, the young viscount. Keep to yourselves and enjoy the voyage, but anything disagreeable and, if you're lucky, I'll throw you overboard myself."

"Why do you threaten us?" A young man asked, lifting his head from his forearms, where it had been resting. He was a powerfully built man with deep eyes which waved at the steps of wisdom. He wore a dirty grey tunic beneath a black cloak and had the beginnings of a light brown beard. His face was calm, and his gaze was diffident, distant.

"I do not threaten, only inform." Giuseppe said. "You best keep an eye on him." He said to the older man.

"No man is my keeper." Said the young man. "These good people I have not met, just as, until a moment ago, I had not looked upon your face."

"Very well. Keep an eye on yourself. Just stay out of our way and there will be no problems.

The young man bowed his head slightly in response before returning his head to his forearms.

Giuseppe, with a "hmmph", stormed off to reprimand his men for moving too slowly.

"Take care not to anger these men." The older traveler said. "If not for yourself, then for the rest of us. We need no trouble."

"Nor I." The younger man answered, looking up. "But I will not be bullied."

"Oh, fie on the pride of youth."

"Friend, perhaps it is pride, but I have borne too much in this life to allow myself to be treated as a servant or slave by those no better than I."

"The man is a viscount."

"And I am free."

"That may be, but they are thirty to your one. To remain free, a man must at times acquiesce to circumstance."

"It is true, I admit, but there are times also when a man must uphold his principles. Otherwise he is not truly free. We shall see of which kind this voyage turns out to be."

"Pray that it is neither, and we make port in good time and good health."

"To that I drink." The young man retrieved a leather wine bottle from his baggage and withdrew the stop. "Join me?" He asked before raising the wine to his lips.

"Thank you, no. It is forbidden."

"Oh." The young man wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You might not mention that to our friends here. They might mistake you for their enemy."

"Yes; you see why we wish no trouble."

"Why tell me?"

"You are not like them."

"What makes you think that?"

"I am old. I can tell these things." The old man smiled and turned to his companions. He said a few short words in Arabic, and the woman handed him a jug. "Olive oil. To you." He drank. "I am called el Baya."

"Pervides."

"My brother, cousin and my brother's wife." He motioned to each with an open hand. "We travel to Mecca, the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed. Why do you travel to Athens?"

"To visit my great uncle."

"You are Greek then?"

"No, no. He moved there years ago. I lived with him for four years. He taught me Greek and Latin proper."

"Can you read?"

"A little Latin."

"I wish I knew how. Though I have made it this long all right."

"May I do the same." Pervides downed a mouthful of wine. "Ah, our friend returns." Giuseppe approached. "Care for a drink, friend?"

"No, thank you. We need you people to move to the rear of the ship."

"For what reason?" Pervides asked. A smirk rose on his lips.

"That is none of your business."

"It is. I was here first, and these fine people were here before me. What right have you, who have just arrived, to ask us to leave? If you have a legitimate reason, surely we will move. Otherwise, we will not."

"Listen here you riffraff."

"There's no need to be upset. I just want to know your reasons."

As Giuseppe stared at Pervides, his face turned rouge with anger, but as he began to open his mouth, he was interrupted by el Baya. "We will move, my kind fellow. Think nothing of it."

"Thank you father." Giuseppe managed through clenched teeth. He continued to stare at Pervides as the Muslims gathered their belongings.

"Join us my young friend." The old man said as they started aft.

"Thank you el Baya, but I am comfortable here." He put his head back into his folded arms. He did not make a sound as Giuseppe's strong hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him toward his feet.

"Up you and follow the rest."

On his feet, Pervides brushed Giuseppe's hand with his fingertips, and when the soldier released his grasp, he returned to the deck and put his head back down. A frustrated scream was the only response Giuseppe could muster before he kicked Pervides in the ribs, knocking him to his side. Pervides, without a sound, repositioned himself. Giuseppe kicked him again. Yet unmoved, Pervides sat up. Before placing his head down he calmly looked at Giuseppe and said, "Three times you have struck me without recourse. There shall not be a fourth." His face had yet touched the cloth of his cloak when Giuseppe made to kick him again, but this time his foot was caught by Pervides' strong arms and his entire body wrenched to the ground. Quickly both men were on their feet. They began to circle.

"I am going to enjoy this." Giuseppe smiled. Pervides made a short bow but said nothing. Giuseppe led off with a glancing blow to Pervides' jaw. As it slid off his face, Giuseppe's ribs were open for a moment, and they received a fist. A crowd of soldiers and sailors assembled and screamed in lust for blood. The combatants traded empty swings, and then Giuseppe landed a solid blow to the side of Pervides' head. It knocked him back a little and seemed to stun him. His hands hung low in front of him, and his head rocked just a bit. Giuseppe smiled and moved in to finish him off. Before he could strike one punch, he was met by a fist to the nose, a second to the jaw and then a knee to the face as Pervides caught him by the back of the head and violently brought Giuseppe's head between the meeting of hand and leg. Giuseppe dropped to the ground. "You sly dog." He said, spitting blood as he raised himself to his hands and knees. Pervides had moved off a few steps to allow him to rise.

"Enough?" He asked indifferently.

"Not today." Giuseppe answered as he reached his feet. "You're a strong lad, I'll grant, but I've bore more than that a hundred times."

Pervides again made a short bow, and they began to circle at a slower pace. Giuseppe rushed, Pervides dodged. They exchanged soft jabs and then a few empty thrusts until Pervides' fist met a charging Giuseppe on the temple and the older man dropped gracelessly to the ground, unconscious. Pervides turned, walked to his bags and resumed his previous position. He did not move as Giuseppe awakened with a groan and the soldiers pondered as to whether they had thought such a thing was possible and if they should take revenge.

"You shall do no such thing." Samson said from the door of his tent.

"All right now, fun's over." Captain Lugosi yelled to his men. "Make ready to sail." The sailors scurried off.

"Help him over there, beside the tent." Samson told the soldiers before walking to Pervides. He sat beside him, where the old Mussulman had been sitting. The men were leading a staggering Giuseppe to a pile of hay, where they lay him down.

"Where is he? I'll get him yet." Giuseppe was mumbling, although, when they put him on a blanket, he did not attempt to rise.

"Good morrow." Samson said to Pervides, who raised his head and glanced at Samson.

"Good day. You are the viscount?"

"Yes. My name is Samson." He put out his hand.

"Pervides." Their strong hands met, and as if they shared a joke, they both smiled.

"That was impressive." Samson said after an amiable moment of silence.

"Entirely unnecessary however."

"Yes. I apologize. I saw it all. He was entirely out of line."

"Is he always so abrupt?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Men like him; well, they make good soldiers."

"But not good men?"

"I did not say that."

Pervides laughed. "There's no need. So, where about are you the viscount?"

"My father is the Count di Gregoire. His lands are northeast a ways."

"I know the place. A very pretty land."

"It is."

"It was some time since I passed through, but if I remember there was a small village a bit north of your castle. A family there was nice enough to let me stay with them. Do you know the place?"

"How long ago?"

"Six, seven years."

"The village was nice?"

"Splendid. If I remember right there were four or five families, clans really, who lived there. A few hundred people in all. Maybe fifty houses. A beautiful sloping hill and orchard to the north."

"Yes, I know the place. It's now a dirty mining village."

"Really? That's a shame. It was such a nice place."

"Yes, but it was burned to the ground."

"How terrible. The entire village?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think the owner of the mine is responsible."

"No. Who could commit such atrocity?"

"It's worse. Not only was the village burned, but I am fairly certain the villagers were slaughtered."

"No."

"Yes. And I am ashamed to say, though I am not certain, my own father ordered the attack when the villagers refused to sell their land."

"Your father? It must be a burden to you to carry his name."

"Frankly? Yes, at times, but it is also my grandfather's and great-grandfather's name. They were good men, as far as I know."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why would your father want their land so badly as to kill those people?"

"Gold."

"And for this even children were murdered?"

"Yes."

"And do you think this right?"

"Of course not, but what could I do? I still do not know exactly what happened, and even if I did, what could I do? The people are already dead."

"There was a stream there, was there not?"

"Yes. I swam in it many times."

"I remember watching the children trying to skip rocks. They were so merry; so innocent. Now you tell me they are dead. Was your father there? Did he kill them with his own hands; watch them burn?"

"I do not know."

Silence buried them in a blanket of thought, and it remained until Marcus approached. The ship jerked as the sails were lifted.

"Your meal is ready, my lord." Marcus said.

"What? Oh, thank you Marcus. I will be there momentarily. Would you care to join me Pervides?"

"Thank you, but I would prefer to be alone at the moment."

"Quite understandable. Perhaps another time."

"Thank you viscount."

Samson nodded his head thoughtfully and walked toward his tent, leaving Pervides to stare at the open blue sky, unblinking and unmoving. His face was blank, as when a man's emotions overwhelm him and he exists entirely within his own head.

"Who is he?" Marcus asked as Samson seated himself at the table.

"I don't know." Samson answered, tilting his head to the side in consideration. "But I respect him."

Chapter Thirteen

On the third day Neptune raised his staff and the four winds sullied from their distant homes to converge on the Ligurian Sea. They brought with them the demons of storm, which loosed on the men below a torrent of rain, thunder and lightning. The banshees were in full voice indeed, swirling about the masts with their peculiar howls. Up, up, the ship rose to the climax of each wave, only to crash down again into the gulf between. Men lashed themselves to the ship and called upon the one true God. As if these pleas had angered forgotten Zeus, a lightning bolt descended from the heavens and splintered the masthead. For a moment a fire lit the black, but it fizzled in the rain. The wind raged, tearing Samson's fine tent from the deck and burying it in the sea. A wave washed over the bow. When it passed, three men were gone. A poorly lashed rope whipped against the remnants of the mast. It made an odd "plosh" sound every time it hit the wood. Plosh. Plosh. A scream. A giant wave. The silence of overwhelming noise as the wind erased time and the notion of there ever

having been a sun. Plosh. A horse bellowing, terrified. Its voice was shattering. Then it was gone. Somewhere in the darkness, it is trying to swim, trying to live, but it shall not prevail. A ray of lightning lights the scene. There are many men left, drenched and tied to quivering lumber, but more were gone.

Samson had strapped himself to the starboard railing near the rear corner of the deck. Marcus was beside him, looking like a kitten who has fallen in a mud puddle, his skin pale with sea sickness. Giuseppe was beyond Marcus, and from time to time he would let out a curse. Samson could not always see Giuseppe, and even Marcus was difficult to make out.

"We should go below sir." Marcus had said as the storm began to churn.

"Go Marcus. I would rather remain on deck where I can see something. Give the men a choice, and once they're all set, tell the captain so his men can seal the hold." Marcus hesitated but set off to direct the soldiers. Two stayed on deck. The rest nestled in amongst the cargo below, along with the Muslims and about half the sailors. The captain and his mate manned the steering oar, while the remainder lined the walls. Everyone tied themselves to the ship and waited. Already the gusts were severe. Sitting there, in the darkness, a rope raking his chest raw with every lurch of the ship, he thought of Mirabel. He had attempted to start a letter a week earlier in hopes of sending it off before he left Genoa. Words failed him. To state the expected; where he was, a formal greeting and well wishes for her and her family; seemed meritless. He wanted to say more. But what? He sat for more than an hour with a pen in his hand, staring blankly at the flaming oil lamp until it eventually flickered and died. It was quiet in the room and with the shutters latched only a faint glow prevented darkness from blanketing his mind. Distantly he heard the sound of a mouse gnawing. A horse neighed on the street outside, and Samson moved placidly to his bed. His thoughts were empty. He closed his eyes. The same black charcoal of twilight. Then he was dancing, and he could feel her touch on his arm; her warmth. Why did he go when behind there was the possibility of love? It seemed a far greater prize than any that might be won by battle. Yes, they were young. All the more reason to fall in love. Love. What is that? His father said he loved his mother, but the way he treated her: if that was love, he did not want it. He wanted something more pure; something beautiful. Always beautiful. Something so beautiful that everything else, including one's self, becomes secondary to the union of spirits. That was the love he imagined. The love he wanted, prayed for. But was she the answer to that prayer? Or, in her, might he find a different love, not too dissimilar from his father's. A love which at first is passionate and full but in time wanes to become merely a collaboration of individuals so used to having each other near that to be apart would feel like loss. Passion dies. Love does not. But at the start, how does one know which it is that tears at one's heart and plagues one's mind? And what if it had been someone else sitting at that table that night? What if another girl had caught his eye first? But it was her. Whether by circumstance or fate, she was there. And he could remember the details of her face. He would always remember, unless. What if there was another? Is it possible that in this life there are potential lovers present in many situations, but only a few, or even one, or none, are acted upon? Then what of class? Had she been a peasant girl would he have even glanced twice in her eyes or wondered if someday she might be his wife? Might there have been lust but naught else? The mind yields few concrete conclusions on the field of love, save it feels good to want and be wanted; to feel comfortable and to desire.

Samson fell asleep that night having concluded very little except that he enjoyed very much the time that he spent with Mirabel and that he wanted to spend more with her. What to call it, he realized, was irrelevant.

"Everyone is settled in." Marcus said as he strapped himself beside Samson. He said something else, but the wind drowned him out. He grew wretched looking quickly, and Samson worried that, by staying on deck, he had made it worse for the squire. He should have made him go below, he thought, as a large wave broke the bow and seawater swept against him, searing into the rope wounds on his chest. A deafened scream, and Marcus crashed into Samson. He reached out for him and caught Marcus' left forearm in his united hands. The water rolled forward with the ship, and Marcus swung forward, smashed against the railing and ripped from Samson's right hand. A tearing pain shot through Samson's right shoulder as the grasp broke. There was a still moment, and their eyes met. Marcus was on his knees and left hand, while his right hand remained in Samson's left hand. His face was terror. Then it was calm, and he smiled weakly, as if to say goodbye. Vainly Samson began to reach forward with his free hand and tried to speak the word, "rope," but the stillness was ended and the crash of the next wave burrowed into the helplessness of the moment. It struck the ship from the leeward side, and Samson was underwater for a moment. Everything was quiet again beneath the wave. The weight

tore at his arm, and he felt Marcus sliding away. He was holding his wrist when the water broke over his head, but somewhere in the moments afterward, the young man vanished. Samson did not notice at the moment, just that when he was smashed against the deck with the receding water, his hands were free. The saltwater was bitter on his tongue, and in a brief moment of pause, he realized Giuseppe too was gone. Then the water swept over him, and he struggled to free himself from the ropes. A terrible crackling sound, and the ship caved in the middle, gallon after gallon of death bearing water spilling into the hold and the lungs of the men below. Frantically his fingers tore at the ropes. He was crashed by a wave, and this time the waters did not recede. Sinking, he felt for the knife he had carefully strapped to his side. It was gone. His fingers were numb, bleeding. Still he worked the ropes. The water reached his shoulders. His neck. He took a deep breath. Then he felt a bump. A strong hand grasping his shoulder. Beneath the water a knife worked its way through the ropes, and he was free, swimming against the tugging backflow of the sinking ship. He closed his eyes and flailed his muscles, surging forward ever slowly against the raging sea. He heard something. It sounded like a voice. He opened his eyes. Darkness. He swallowed the ocean. The phantom voice again. He tried to swim to it; to reach out through the terrible weakness which burdened him; the contrary thoughts which said to stop, to sleep and dream the last dream. His eyes were open, but everything was black. He would sink sometimes. Then rise up. He could not remember what he was doing. He did not know his arms were moving. He thought he saw a horse in a green field, dancing on its hind legs, its mane blowing in the wind. He tried to smile and remembered, vaguely, that he was swimming. He was beneath the surface when he saw reality in the awkward darkness which has neither up nor down. He began to swim upward. Then a flashing light at the back of his head, and he knew he swam sideways. Now toward the lightning he tread. His legs burned. The muscles in his neck grew taught, and his foolish jaw strove to open. The gray emptiness of unconsciousness, of death, began to form at the outskirts of his recognition. He waved his limbs faster. He could not see. He could feel nothing but the movement of his own body. His chest seized, and he stopped. He felt like he was falling, a distant swirl of peace and chaos spiraling around his sense of things. Then something real. A strong hand had taken hold and pulled him upward. Such a long ways it seemed, but then the thunder of the sea was in his ears and he would remember the tearing, beautiful, pain of that first breath the remainder of his life. He struggled onto something hard, and then weakness and the grayness overwhelmed.

When he awakened, he was strapped to a small raft, his legs dangling in the sea. A warm body pressed against his shoulder and occasionally flailed its legs in an attempt to steer the tiny raft against an oncoming wave. A piece of tile was under Samson's cheek. The galley. Marcus. He remembered. The sinking of the ship. He raised his head and sought in vain to see someone else paddling amongst the rain.

"Kick!" The man beside him ordered, and Samson obeyed. They rose high on a wave. A lightning strike. The wind was in a rage, and was he not entirely soaked, Samson would have felt the tremor of the billowing rain. That moment seemed it would last forever; the motionless motion of rising and falling in what seemed a solitary place. Time had never seemed so slow. It could not be measured. The peril, though similar to each wave before, did not cease to drain; did not cease to be real. Samson was exhausted, and as the sky finally lightened to a hollow gray, he turned to his companion and could finally discern him. Pervides. With a gentle nod of recognition, Samson closed his eyes and passed into the realm of sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

A black and yellow wall lizard lay on a lava stone sunning himself in apparent indifference to the remainder of the world. From time to time he was doused by the tide as it broke on the shore beside him and fell back upon itself. The lizard would open one eye, close it, open the other eye, close it and return to its contemplations, whatever they might have been, if indeed such a creature contemplates or feels anything beyond the brute sensations of satisfaction and pain. Once, when opening his eyes, he may have noticed a small collection of tiled planks with a confused hump of men atop of it. The men were motionless. They had been for more than a day, since the rain stopped and the clear sky allowed the sun first to dry and then begin to burn them. Eventually the raft washed against the white sands. It swept back a little and then, with a rush, thumped against the black rock, startling the lizard from his restful nap. He scurried to the shadows as a groan creaked

from the raft. One of the men raised his head and licked his lips slowly before dropping his face roughly against the tile. A few moments passed before his hands felt along his side and retrieved a knife from its sheath. He cut the cords which bound him, and rising to the sitting position with a groan, he severed his companion's bonds. He shook his companion but received no response. After another pause he knelt in the water and pushed the raft inland. The effort exhausted him, and once the vessel was beyond the waves, he collapsed in the sand. He did not move until the rising tide engulfed his feet.

He left the raft and staggered some twenty feet to where grass met the sand. A few birds scattered as he entered a field. The sea breeze grasped him. Warmly it pressed against his chest, and as he shaded his eyes from the sun, he began to pant. He dropped to his knees and dry heaved. Eagerly his languid limbs called for him to close his senses and to slumber. The ground was soft here; solid. Later. He could find food later. Water could wait. Sleep was good. The dirt smelled fresh, inviting. The grass was a friend. Embrace them. Forget. Forget everything. There is no need to think. Rest.

Pervides shook his head and forced himself to his feet. His legs dragged, but he was moving. There was no alternative. He would die if he lay down. Each time his foot touched the ground it felt like someone punched him in the thigh. His calf muscles, when not cramped with dehydrated exhaustion, felt like they were becoming detached from the rest of his leg and at any moment might fall off all together. He plucked a blade of the long, yellowed, grass and sucked on it. His mouth was dry; his saliva sticky. The grass stuck to his tongue, and at the back of his throat he could taste the foul acids of his empty stomach. In his head a hint of death remained, clutching his mind in throes of aches and blindness. Every few steps he was forced to rest and stare about in hopes of finding himself somewhere else.

At length he came to a tree and propped himself in the shade. He sat motionless, his eyes glazed in dumb animal despair until the fluttering sound of sparrow wings arrested his attention. The bird alighted above him. Briefly it settled in its nest before Pervides rustled the brush at his feet and startled it away. He stood and reached into the nest. In his fingers he held three small eggs, white with small specks of brown. For a moment he looked at the nest and then cracked one of the eggs into his open mouth. The half developed embryo was torturous to his tongue. One of the soft claws scraped against his taste buds, and one eye came loose, lingering behind his molars a moment or two after the remainder had crawled sluggishly down his throat. He ran his tongue around his mouth, swallowing every bit of the sticky moisture. He looked at the remaining eggs and then toward the sea. He closed his hand. With a sheepish glance to the returning sparrow, he left the shade.

It was a trial to climb the gentle slope which met his feet, but at the end, when he was headed down, his heart was filled with hope. There was green ahead and the familiar leaves of chestnut trees packed tight around what turned out to be a stream. He knelt in the water and raised a drink to his parched lips. The sweetness was divine. The feeling cannot be described. One by one he ground a dozen nuts between his teeth and swallowed each with a mouthful of water. After the last he cut the sleeves from his tunic and bound them one inside the other so that he might carry water with him. He filled his stockings with nuts and tied them together so they hung about his neck. With one final draught from the stream, he set off toward the shore.

Samson lay as he had left him. Pervides turned him onto his back and felt his pulse. It was faint, slow. He poured a little water to his lips and wiped it over his face. He dipped his fingers in the water and forced them into Samson's mouth. He held his head up and forced, bit by bit, a cup or two of the fluid down his throat. He set about mashing a handful of nuts into a paste, crushing them between two rocks with a hint of water to make the mixture moist. As he was finishing, Samson coughed and moved his head the slightest bit. His eyes remained closed, but as Pervides fed him the nut paste, he managed to swallow on his own. Pervides gave him a little more water, along with the remaining sparrow eggs, and then lay him down to rest. He ate a few handfuls of nuts himself and then lay beside Samson.

It was some hours before either stirred. The sun had begun its descent and would be nearly set by the time they retraced the half mile to the stream. Samson leaned on Pervides as they walked. Even with his help he could manage only a few steps at a time. Ascending the rise after the tree with the empty sparrow nest, they managed, at best, a dozen feet between rests. Samson generally would fall asleep, rising only when Pervides shook him by the shoulder and softly told him it was time to be moving on. By nightfall they were encamped beside the stream. It was a wretched night for Samson. Memories now broke through his delirium; brief flashes of the past days; the plight of Marcus and the other various men he had known, some well, some not at all. A fever clutched him in its warm hands, and he would awake sometimes screaming or choking on psychosomatic

waves. Sometime he thought he was still on the raft. Once he awoke and called out for his beloved hound Diadem. He felt warm canine breath on his cheek. Then a touch, a wet nose to a dry nose, and finally a slobbering tongue across his eyes. He laughed and reached out for Diadem. She was fading. He felt the bitter seawater on his lips and desperately attempted to open his eyes. He could not. It felt like his veins were filled with something alive; something pulsing which wanted to leave him or lead him somewhere he did not want to go. He would alternately feel like he was falling or spinning. Occasionally he felt like he was merging into the ground, becoming trapped in that place, rooted like a tree or ten ton boulder. Then the boulder would roll. He was on the raft. An unknown bird shrieked overhead. It said, "This is." It paused. "The end." It paused again. "Forgive." Then it cried like an ordinary bird, and the myth of the divine vanished as his ears ached at the shrillness of its sound. It would not cease, and for a moment Samson felt the creature's talons on his face. They burned. Then everything was gone. He passed into such a peaceful sleep that Pervides, sitting beside him, attempting to start a fire, took time to check that he was still alive.

Chapter Fifteen

Samson sat at the summit of the island. It was a small hill of little more than six hundred feet, beneath which the land circled out, a half a mile to the north and east, one to the west and a little more than two to the south. Two streams cut the brush, one to the south, the other, surrounded by the life saving chestnut trees, to the west. Between the two streams was a small forest of cork, oak and olive trees. The remainder of the island was covered in a waving mix of grass, rocks and occasional trees rising like signposts from the land. The eastern shore was lined with jagged rocks, while the remainder was gowned in a mix of black and ordinary sand. To the east, at the edge of the horizon, land was visible. In vain they had posted themselves at the hilltop those first few weeks, hoping to catch sight of a ship. When it became obvious that no sails would pass, they had given up the watch, though Samson still took time to climb the mount on occasion, just in case. Besides, the view was relaxing. Often he fell asleep with the sun on his naked chest. The glowing blue of the sky hovered at the crack where his eyelids met and innocent dreams unfolded. It was a more peaceful rest than the hours of darkness. He still had nightmares most nights, though he did not remember them or really know why he often awakened as tired as when he went to bed.

"Your dreams will ruin you." Pervides told him one morning. "It was not your fault."

"What? The shipwreck?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that is what it is?"

"In part."

"What else?"

"I do not know. I think, maybe, you are coming to terms with yourself about who you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Those men that died, you grieve for them?"

"Yes." He looked at Pervides. "They were my responsibility."

"But you lead many of them to their deaths, even had you arrived at your destination."

"Yes."

"This is no light responsibility, to hold life and death in your hands. Some men are too aware of what a grave responsibility it is to bear it without consequence to their mind. You are such a one. You saw the men you led as men, not numbers to be cast in the game of war. Had they died in battle, you would have fared no better in your dreams."

"So I should not lead, should I? I am too weak."

"Nonsense. You are precisely the type of man who should lead for you will value every man at your disposal and risk no life in any trial unless there is no alternative. If all men held the life others so highly, war would indeed be rare. No, it is your virtue you are now discovering, but it is adverse to all the things you have been taught as to what a man should be. Your strength is in your honor. It is a thousand times greater than the strength of force."

"Honor? I do not know this word." He raised his hand to Pervides. "Yes, I have heard of it, but what it is I have never witnessed. I have met no man who lives by honor. Oh, they do in their own eyes, as surely it may seem to you that I do in mine, but there is a righteousness, a virtue, to which true honor must be attached which I cannot breach. My strength? I have no strength. It is weakness, not as you took me to mean, but of an internal nature. I am weak in that I cannot control myself. Lest I can do this, I have no right to lead or attempt to order another man. You say that in this alone is my justification for leading. I say that no man should lead unless he has this virtue. No one else has this right." He smiled ruefully. "But, my friend, there is the way things should be, and then there is reality. In reality it is men such as my father who cling to power and brandish the sword of dominance. Who are we that we might change the way things have always been? We might rule here," he swept his hand across the island, "with a higher ideal, but in no other place."

"Have you no hope that it shall someday be otherwise?"

"From where would I draw such confidence?"

"From your own ideals. Do not forget that, whether you feel yourself worthy, you have been born into a place of power. You can change things, at least in your own district. You can reverse the tyranny of your father."

The tyranny of his father. He wondered how deep it went. It haunted him now in waking as the unknown did in sleep. He sought his first memory of the man. It was vague, but he remembered him standing tall on a jet black horse, gowned in rich hunting clothes, while two servants stood beside him holding a fierce looking boar between them on a pole. Its tusks dripped with blood from an injured dog. Samson was proud of his father then. The mighty hunter, with bow in hand. It was only later that he learned the true meaning of such a hunt. His father, as he in later years, rode pleasantly through the woods while the hounds and servants drove the beast to bay. Then, point blank, the master killed it. It was no fine sport as it seemed at first. The challenge, for him, was in not crying out, "for shame," when the congratulatory gentlemen clapped each other on the back and laughed as if they were the finest royalty in all the world. "It teaches a man to use the tools of war." His father told him before his first hunt. "You take your first step into manhood today." Samson said nothing, but when he stabbed the boar with a spear that evening, after a long day in the saddle, he felt like a murderer. At the feast, the meat was tasteless in his mouth. "Why?" The boar asked when he closed his eyes. "Why did you kill me so? That I am dead is no loss, I was destined for it, but to die such a death; it was no good for either of us."

Weeks later he rode into the woods with Diadem as his lone companion. In the chill light of dawn they left the castle gates to the wordless salute of the guards. Diadem ran on ahead toward the village, snuffling amongst the sprouts of grass at the edge of the road, pausing here and there to remark the land as hers. A rabbit burst from the brush, and she half-heartedly gave chase. The hare disappeared into a hedge, and she returned to Samson's side. Before the town, they turned north. A breeze dropped leaves in his lap, and he caught one, studied it a moment with amusement and then flicked it into the falling streams of its kind. Diadem splashed into a puddle and barked with happiness. As she shook herself dry, Samson spurred his horse and galloped down the road with the dog in pursuit. He darted from the path into a field, jumping a fallen log, his stomach rising, falling, with the simple joy of equestrian flight. Reaching the distant end of the field, he slowed to a trot and patted the horse on the neck. Dionysus, the stallion, shook his head and neighed. His mane waved against Samson's hand.

At a stream, a little ways through the evergreen woods at the far side of the field, he found the fresh print of a stag. Diadem bayed as she took the trail, her black and brown tail waving as she sped off, leaving her own padded footprints in the mud. Dionysus followed of his own accord. Samson could feel his heart. It tremored with excitement. This was hunting. A man. His dog. His horse. His bow. His sword. He needed naught else. Diadem led up a hill. It was alive with noise. Songbirds fluttered from tree to tree, resting just long enough to tweet a few lines of the intrinsic melody merrily mouthed by all. Through shadows and sunbeams they tread toward their prey. The sun cycled its course overhead, and beneath the midday breeze they paused to drink and partake of a small meal of dried beef. Neither dog nor man ate much, while the horse was content to nibble on leaves and odd shoots of grass as they trod on with their pursuit. Diadem grew suddenly silent. Even her breathing was stilled as she nosed the wind. A brief look told Samson that she had found her prey. Silently she crept forward. Samson dismounted and tread behind her, glancing at the ground before each step lest he break a branch or loose a stone. Gently he placed each foot on the ground, feeling at what lay beneath

before allowing his full weight to fall. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he heard everything; more than ever in his life. He could hear the mossy ground crackling ever so soft as it reached its tiny limbs upward to the sun. He heard a squirrel in its nest, rustling. His own footsteps seemed thunderous; Diadem's faint. Every movement, each leaf and change of shadow drew his eye. A small dirt clod, for however long lodged between two roots protruding from a hillside, tumbled down the hill and crashed against a rock. He turned his head, hoping to find a graceful hoof had set it in motion. To no avail. Diadem did not move her head, though her ears perked for a moment. She was deliberate now, and Samson was so close he could feel the warmth from her tail on his leg. A sunbeam blinded him momentarily as he passed beneath a five trunked oak. Moths were dancing overhead in a column, eating something he could not see. Diadem stopped. He followed her gaze, and on the far side of a small ravine, he saw the buck. Its horns looked like tree branches, and it walked slowly, pausing every few moments to listen suspiciously for the threat which was now cautiously, breathlessly, reaching for an arrow at its back. Twenty yards at the level. Fifty yards in footsteps. Samson's fingers trembled as he slid the arrow to the string, but as he raised the bow in one smooth, exaggeratedly slow, motion, his hand grew steady. The line was taut in his hands, and his muscles began to burn as he took aim. He exhaled. The stag turned to him, cocking its ear. Release. The whizzing sound of the arrow, and before the beast could turn the arrow creased its ribs and struck its heart. Defiantly it leapt up the hillside, but its steps wavered and it slowed until it was moving each foot an agonizing three inches at a time. It fell to its front knees. Samson began toward it. At the sound the deer proudly rose to its feet and managed three final steps, each like a king with its head held high and chest instilled with grace. Then it fell and moved no more. Samson held a dagger in his hand, but upon reaching the noble creature, he returned it to its sheath and knelt beside his kill. Diadem sat beside him, and together they were quiet; a silent prayer of ages before gods, spoke in wordless respect for the passing life which lay before them. Rising after an appropriate time, Samson placed his hand warmly on Diadem's head. While he retrieved Dionysus, the dog lay down beside the carcass and rested his head on its lifeless chest.

Removing his tunic, Samson set about slaughtering the meat. He paused before the first cut. "Thank you." He said out loud and then drove the blade into the stag's breast. After removing the viscera, he cut a steak from the flank and tossed it on the ground before Diadem. She looked at him with a sparkle in her eyes and bit into the flesh, chewing it slowly, as a dog does when relaxed and safe from any threat. She seemed proud and ate like a man does the most exquisite treat. Samson retrieved flint and steel from Dionysus' saddle bag and ignited a fire. After erecting a small spit, he cut a thick loin steak and skewered it with a metal rod. He covered the remaining flesh with the skin and sat beside the fire, slowly turning the spit. Meat juice fell from the slab and sizzled in the flames. His mouth watered, and he felt happy. When Diadem sat beside him and rested her head in his lap, he found himself smiling uncontrollably. He rubbed behind her ears, and she nuzzled against his ribs. Aroma surrounded him, teasing pleurably at his nostrils with a swift foretelling of the future. It swirled with the wind, sometimes faint, sometimes so strong it seemed it was his own flesh being charred. His hand continued to turn until the meat had just a hint of black along its edges. He removed it from the pole in a series of short yanks and then juggled it from hand to hand to let it cool just a bit. When he could hold it firmly he raised it to his mouth. As his teeth slid into the tender flesh, streams of redness drained down his chin and hands, all the way to his elbow where drop by drop they sallied to the ground. The morsel tore from the steak, and he closed his mouth. He did not chew, allowing the taste to soak against his tongue. He churned it from side to side, allowing every drop of the savory fluid to exit of its own accord until there was no more and he began to chew, releasing yet more taste. The inside of his cheeks felt like they had grown taste buds. It seemed he could taste with his entire body this blessed creature which but an hour ago strode through the wood in watchful elegance. The meat slide down his throat. Another bite followed. His body was filled with warmth.

It was a few hours later he rode into the village Qoh, five miles to the north of castle di Gregoire. He had taken a relaxing nap after his meal and was in a hearty mood. Entering from the woods he crossed a small stone bridge arching over a languid pool in an otherwise swift flowing brook. Four children splashed in the pool and waved to him as he passed. They were young, five at the oldest, two at the youngest. They laughed like sprites and leapt from the bridge while he paused to watch. In the fluttering sunlight easily might he have believed they wore wings and floated above the water at will until finally splashing in the mist. He spurred Dionysus and moved toward the village center at a slow walk. Here a large well opened from the ground, and an older man was drawing water. Behind him three women stood at the village's communal baking oven. Both were under a single roof. Stone walls enclosed the oven on three sides, while the well was open. Samson dismounted.

"Greetings." The man said as Samson approached. There was respect in his voice, though he did not add the accustomed "sir" or "my lord".

"Good day." Samson answered. "Might I have some water?"

"Of course." The man removed one of a dozen cups hanging from the posts of the well and filled it. He wiped the overflow on his sleeve and handed it to Samson. He drained it.

"Thank you." He said as he returned the cup. "Now, I was hoping you could do me a favor."

"Anything within my means." The man bowed slightly. "What have you in mind?"

Samson smiled and pointed to Dionysus. "Well, you see that buck?"

"Yes."

"I was hoping you could find someone to take the meat off my hands. My dog and I have eaten our fill, and it seems such a waste to take it back to my father's castle. There's too much food there already."

"My young lord is aware that we are forbidden to hunt the deer in these forests." A sour look crossed the old man's face.

"No. Why?"

"By your father's decree."

"How foolish. There's enough for everyone." He paused a moment, thinking. Then, waving his hand. "It is no matter. I have killed it, and by your leave, I shall remain here while it is eaten."

"You are welcome, of course. It will be a few hours yet before there will be enough mouths to finish off the buck, but we can begin preparations. Diana," he said to one of the women, "would you give me a hand with the young gentleman's deer?"

"Nonsense." Samson interrupted. "I will help. And, by the way, my name is Samson."

The other man looked at him thoughtfully for a moment and then extended his hand. "Samson. My name is Louis. In this village are three of my brothers, five of my sons and nineteen of my grandsons. We are of the family Agravé. In this village are also the families Niconi and Dipetrus." Looking Samson meaningfully in the eye, he added, "We are all free men." Samson understood and nodded softly. They turned to Dionysus and unstrapped the buck.

They placed the carcass on a stone slab between the oven and the well. It was three feet high and grooved around the edge to catch the blood or wastewater and drain it to the ground. The table was also used to form dough into loaves and to deposit the fresh bread when it was removed from the oven. Louis set about skinning the carcass, while Samson dug a hole for a bonfire outside the structure.

"Look at its horns." One of the young children said as they joined Louis at the table. "Grandfather, did you kill this?"

"No, no. The young man with the shovel did. A single arrow too, right to the heart, judging by the hole in the pelt. That's just how your father can teach you to shoot. That's the way your brother can shoot."

"Will he be coming back soon?"

"Oh, now, I don't know." He looked at Samson. "There is hope." Then loudly. "You know he killed the count's deer and the count's men want to kill him for it."

"Won't they want to kill the shoveler too?"

"No, not him."

"Why?"

"Ask him."

"Mister? Hey mister." The boy was standing beside Samson. He stood up straight and looked at the child. He had green eyes like his grandfather and brown hair. He seemed happy, as if his entire life had been spent in such play as diving carefree into the stream. "Um, you killed the deer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"To eat him."

"Oh." The boy stared at him, trying to remember his original question. "My brother killed a deer once."

"Yes."

"Now the count wants to kill him."

"Why?"

"I don't know." The boy smiled and looked at the ground. "Does the count want to kill you too?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The count is my father."

The boy stepped back, glancing up in part awe and part fear. "Do you want to kill my brother too?" His voice bore a trace of indignation.

"No."

"Oh."

"Do you want to help me dig this hole?"

"Okay." He ran off. Samson shrugged and continued with his task. After a moment the boy returned with a child-size shovel and started to scrape at the dirt. "Was it hard?"

"What's that?"

"Killing the deer."

"A little, yes."

"I like deer."

"Yes?"

"Yeah, I saw one the other day. Just a little one. He smiled at me."

"Can a deer smile?"

"Oh yes, of course they can. Everything can smile."

"Even frogs."

"Yes."

"Cows."

"Yes."

"Dragons."

"No, not them."

"Why not?"

"They're always mean."

"Have you seen one?"

"No, but in the stories they're always mean. You can't smile if you're always mean."

"I guess you're right. I know a man who never smiles."

"A man?"

"Yes."

"Is he mean?"

"All the time. Do you think the hole is deep enough?"

"I don't know."

"Can you ask your grandfather?"

Samson set his shovel aside and watched the boy run to the table. His grandfather glanced over at Samson, said something to the child, and the child raced back, skidding in the fresh pile of dirt.

"He says its fine. I have to go now. My father will be coming home from the field, and I always walk with him. Bye."

"Goodbye."

"A nice kid." Samson said as he approached Louis.

"Yes. The youngest of my grandchildren and my namesake. He holds a special place in my heart."

The evening was beautiful. Nearly the entire village joined the feast. Some brought wine, others bread or apples, and by the end of the meal, there was dance, song and great merriment. Samson would sit back from time to time and watch. It was wonderful, he thought. There were no servants, no served. They shared, but no one seemed to take advantage. These, people whom had worked all day farming their own crops, tending their sheep or cattle; they were able to celebrate freely, graciously, without bowing in obeisance to anyone. A simple, "thank you," was the most he received from anyone. Others gave a soft nod. But it was unneeded. He provided meat. They ate it. They provided bread, wine, beer and cheer. He absorbed these. It was a fair trade. No one used anyone else. They were equals sharing equally the joy earned through a day of necessary labor. He considered softly to himself that this world in which they lived was better than his own. Yet, he could do more, he realized. He could, in time, return to them the god-given right of every man to feel as he had felt that

afternoon. He could undo the injustice his father and his father's fathers had levied on men such as these by the heavy hand of brute force. No man should consider himself so high as to dictate the lives of others so absolutely as that. Yet these, he realized as he rode down the silent road that night, were not the most affected. They, at least, were free from the burden of supporting him and his father by their labor. Those others, in the town di Gregoire, were mostly serfs bound to his family for a lifetime of toil. Was it a sin, he wondered; the life he was born into. Was a man born to power at fault the same as a man who crushes a thousand men to attain that power? Was, for that matter, the power of lordship wrong? To lead surely was not. To oppress surely was. To organize a district efficiently could not be. To suck every coin into one's coffers from the pockets of all others, whether by force, threat of force or coercion, must be wrong. Must be; by what did he base this conclusion. It was not the word of God. Not, at least, in any sense he had ever heard. No priest or abbot had ever told him he had any responsibility except to himself, the house di Gregoire and the holy church itself. Yet, he had read the bible. The words of Jesus remained with him. "Love thy neighbor as thyself."¹ "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."² "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."³ Were these the ideals which called wordlessly from his heart and told him that the world he had been born into, the world which seemingly had always existed, was wrong.

"Stay away from those wretched people." Simeon had said when Samson told him about his hunt and the feast. "They are an indolent bunch. And do not go off hunting like a commoner anymore. You are a gentleman. Act like it."

It was about two weeks later that Samson heard the town had been burned to the ground. He rode the five miles at a gallop, attempting to outrace the formless rage which had gripped him.

"Qoh is gone." He had burst in upon his father. Simeon sat with three advisors at a marble table. A pheasant carcass, half consumed, sat in the center.

"Yes." Simeon answered casually.

"You know."

"Yes."

"And you did nothing?"

"Why," Simeon smirked, "would I help them? They have never done a thing for me." He chuckled.

"Did you order it?"

"Samson, my son, we are in a meeting. We can talk of this triviality another time."

"Triviality? You monster. More than a hundred people lived in that village."

"Yes, well, now they don't." He looked sternly at Samson and motioned with his hand for the boy to leave. "He has a lot to learn." Samson heard his father say as he left the room. He rushed to the stable and onward to Qoh.

The bridge across the stream was still standing. That was all. Bodies lay rotting in the rain. Leaving Dionysus where the charred black of death began, he walked to the town center and stood on the stone table. A girl's body lay on the ground in front of him. A scrap of dress was the same as the girl he had seen playing in the pool. Leaping from the table, he swiped at the flies nibbling on her flesh. They scattered for only a moment. He flailed his limbs like a madman as they continuously approached and darted off. Realizing the futility of the act he removed his cloak and covered her body. Looking around he was overwhelmed. There were dozens of others. Then it hit him in the gut. Nothing this big could happen unless his father had a hand in it. It made the atrocity even more reprehensible. Was this what he was supposed to learn? How to murder the innocent and laugh at it? Never. He could have killed his father at that moment. It would be weeks before he would look him in the eye, and though it gradually became buried beneath the experience of daily living, the fact that his own father was his enemy would never be fully realized nor forgotten.

¹ Mark 12:31

² Matthew 7:12

³ Matthew 18:4

Chapter Sixteen

When there were no ships for two weeks, Pervides resigned himself to the probable fact that there would never be any.

"We are on our own." He told Samson once he was strong enough to accompany him to the peak.

"It seems so." They seated themselves on the ground. "Have any idea where we are?"

"To the south of Rome I would imagine. Though we could have been pushed anywhere in the storm. If we can make that land to the east I think we can learn more."

"Another island?"

"That is my guess. If it was the mainland at least one ship would have passed by now."

"That's true. So what do we do?"

"First, survive."

"Then, a raft?"

"We can, but I prefer a boat."

"Can we make one? We have no tools, except your knife."

"We can make tools. And yes, we can make a boat. It will take longer though. But, personally, I would rather take a few extra months to ensure I don't drown. I'm not talking a ship by any means, but something big enough to sail and last through at least a small storm. I've had enough of being tossed around on a raft."

"Yes. So first we build shelter. Then we spend, what, months, scavenging for food and building a boat?" Pervides nodded. "They'll think we're dead, won't they?"

"Likely. But I have nowhere really to go, so I have no reason to take a chance. I'll stay here for years if I have to. But, I understand, you have people to miss and to be missed by. I know the feeling. I have been in exile for many years."

"It is not quite the same."

"No? At least here, we know what we must do to return home. If the longing to return grows stronger, we work harder. But in exile there is no amount of work that will bring you closer to your home."

"Your eyes water a bit too much to have no one."

"Memories," Pervides said after a moment, "can be carried anywhere. Everyone I ever cared for died some years ago." He grasped a rock from the ground, looked at it a moment and then tossed it down the hill. "So, shall we build a boat?"

"We need tools first."

They set out down the hill and gradually began the process of de-evolving into simplest of men, chipping away at great trees with splintered shards of stone. Their hands grew calloused and bloodied as the days slowly marched into the blinding drudgery of the past. But from their sweat grew progress; slow but continual progress. They built first a small hut by the stream. Eight feet on a side, it provided no more than a place of slumber and a storeroom for the wares which gradually they produced. They carved bowls and jars from solid wood using stone chisels and the finishing blade of Pervides' knife. They hewed trees with stone axes which bludgeoned more than cut. Often it would take days to fell a single tree, and then it would take weeks to transform that tree into two or three ribs for the boat. To make the five full cross ribs, made of two sections each, and the aft to fore spine would take nearly seven months of grueling labor. Generally, they worked in turns on the boat, while the second man saw to fishing, harvesting or preparing food, as well as producing tools and any other needed tasks. Every seventh day they observed the Sabbath by allowing their weary bones to rest. Often on these days they would take a leisurely swim in the ocean or walk to the peak to watch for ships before preparing a small feast for themselves in the evening.

"Thirty weeks." Samson said as he cut a notch in the same tree he had marked since their first Sabbath on the island. "I would have thought we would be done by now when we started. I had no idea how much work this would be."

"Some men work like this their entire lives."

"You?"

"No, no. I was a free man. I worked, but only so much as I needed. The men who work like this do so to support not only themselves but also men such as you."

"Why do you bear such a grudge against nobles? In all this time I have never figured it fully. What you say is true, yes, about men such as I; that we may take much more than we offer in return; but there is something else, something personal. I would venture to say it has something to do with your family, of which you so respectfully speak of in the past tense the odd time their memory seeps from your lips. What has been done to you my friend?"

"I have been wronged, it is true, by noble hands, but my disillusionment with class and caste predate these wrongs. Even in my youth I did not understand the way men treat each other based on rank, occupation or anything but the goodness of their heart. It has always seemed to me wrong to judge people, but judgment is built into the entire concept of class. You are the oldest son of a count. This is meant to imply you deserve the respect of every man beneath you based on no merit of your own. You could be the most degenerate man to ever live, but based on your title of birth, you would demand and receive respect. People follow nobles, with rare exception, because they must, or for money. They will follow a good man with a just cause out of respect. This, I guess, is the root of my disappointment in men of high class: they have, whether or not they are deserved, the power and influence to do great things and truly better the lives of all people. Yet most, if not nearly all, spend their entire lives in the selfish pursuit of more power and more wealth at the burden of those whom they should work to help. That you are wealthy is not a problem in itself. That you spend it on yourself is not really a problem. That you maintain or expand your wealth at the cost of so many others is. How many men have died to fight the wars of noblemen and kings? How many chieftains have pursued selfish goals with the lives of their citizens? The numbers are incalculable. The wrong I see in it, others do not. No one tells a king it is wrong for him to live so richly when he has done nothing to deserve it. No one tells the bishop he is vainglorious. No one tells the serf that it is his innate right as a human being to labor for his own means first and always. We live in communities, large and small, but that does not mean that any man among us deserves to live by the labor of another man." Pervides stopped abruptly and began to chuckle.

"What?" Samson asked after a moment.

"Oh," Pervides said shaking his head, "it is just that words such as these are pointless. They have no effect on the way things actually are. It is only my perception. Who am I to challenge the way men have lived for millennia?"

"If you can change me," Samson said thoughtfully, "you will potentially change the lives of many. It is not the entire world, but it is a start."

"And when your son or grandson becomes a tyrant, what good will it have done?"

"A certain number of people will have lived better lives than they would have had you not existed."

"Ah, Samson," Pervides' voice took on a different tone, almost hopeful sounding, "do you ever dream that the world was a better place where all men were happy and no one attempted to harm another soul? A place where we all laugh like children, with innocence still fresh upon our tongues. Where right and wrong are known without doubt and right is the custom and wrong the extraordinary extreme. A world where wisdom flourishes with true purpose and ingenuity is focused always toward good. A place where hope does not die, that in no man does life ever come to be regarded with contempt and injustice does not exist. Do you ever dream..."

"Of heaven?"

"Yes, but not of God's construction. Of man's. I cannot help but feel we could achieve such a place if we all worked toward that purpose, or at the least, did not do works adverse to its course."

"You are aware, of course, that every man has his own vision of what heaven, or any such place, would be like. It is impossible to harness the awesome power of humanity unless there is a clear common goal, or by force or wealth. I cannot remember a time in history where the first has been the true motive behind any movement."

"As I said: dream. It is all just dream: idealism, hope, faith. Reality is much different. Men are much different than they might be. I am less than I should be."

"Yet, some would say, you hold your aims too high. Lower them, and you will find yourself blessed among men for having a mind capable of such dreams or merely surviving with your idealism intact. If you do

not seek to better all men, you will find you have succeeded well in bettering yourself simply by attempting to better us all."

"That is not something I can accept. To do so would be to give up. I may never find the solution I seek, but I shall never cease to seek."

"But what do you seek?"

"A way to make that dream possible."

"Then you must change the essence of the human being. It is no small task."

"Very likely it is impossible."

"Yet still you shall try."

"Yes."

"How."

"One must first understand something to properly change it."

"Do you understand the human being?"

"Fully? Of course not."

"Shall you ever."

"It seems unlikely."

"No?"

"Correct."

"So you must begin before you properly understand the human being. Is this not a dangerous thing? You could do more harm than good."

"True, but what alternative is there?"

"To not act."

"I am alive."

"So? Many are alive and do nothing beyond eat, sleep and dream."

"And yet that is nearly all I have done thus far. It is not so far to fall. But no. I could not forgo the possibility that I might succeed, at least in some little way."

"So you would be a great man?"

"It is not greatness I seek. It is the end result. Whether anyone knows my name or that I played a hand in it is irrelevant. Yes, I would like to live in such a world as I dream, but I would sacrifice my own life so that all others could live in that world, even if they were ignorant of who I am."

There was silence. The two men looked at each other, and the sincerity of their converse touched them so that they both were at ease with the silence. After a short time Samson nodded his head, stood and added two logs to the fire.

"Come with me." He said without sitting down. "When we leave this place. Come to my home and together we shall try."

Pervides looked at him with consideration, twisting his lips just a bit to show it was no light matter on his mind.

"Okay." He answered. "I will come, but I can promise no more than that. There are things which must be done. Afterwards, if you still request me to join you, I will be honored to accept."

Samson looked at Pervides, nodded silently and walked to the hut. He was soon asleep. Pervides remained a long while at the fire, watching the flames rise and fall until there were but embers, which he also watched for a time before rising and following likewise to slumber.

Chapter Seventeen

With a surge the wind filled the grass sail and launched the boat forward.

"So long island!" Samson yelled triumphantly. "So long chestnuts and olives and you few fish who swam too close. So long!" Pervides simply laughed and glanced back a moment before attending to the rudder. "We've done it, Pervides." Samson continued. "By Jove, it took nineteen months, but we built a boat as strong as any I've been on."

"The last was sturdy as well." Pervides smiled.

"Always the cautious one, eh? It's okay, you'll be celebrating soon enough. I'm never going to eat chestnuts again. Ever. Glad we had them though."

"I'll be damned." The serious tone in Pervides voice caught Samson short.

"What?"

"A ship." Samson turned to share Pervides' gaze. A ship was rounding the southern tip of the land they were approaching. "After all these months."

"A warship?"

"I don't think so. What do you think?"

"Keep to our course. If they want to catch us, they will either way."

"You don't think we should signal them?"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

"It's up to them then."

"Yes."

The sounds of the rolling waves and the slapping sail played against their silence. A few seabirds circled overhead, shrieking from time to time with shrill tongues of unknown meaning. One landed on their mast and looked at the two men. They did not notice.

"It has changed course." Pervides said a moment later.

"Yes, but to intercept us or simply stay close to land?"

They were silent again, and as the minutes passed the two vessels inched nearer. They were approaching the shore now and could make out the steep hills of the land. There was nowhere to go ashore.

"North or south?" Pervides asked.

"We came from the north right, before?"

"As far as we know."

"Then north. Let them do as they wish."

Pervides turned the boat in a slow arc to prevent the impression that they were fleeing. The sail slacked a little, and their speed slowed. The ship was near, and they could make out three men on the bow watching them. One of the waved as they came within a few hundred yards. Samson waved back. He tried not to watch too intently, and the others made no further motion until the ship was beside them. The same three men walked toward them at the starboard railing. The sailors adjusted the sails so the larger ship kept pace with their boat.

"Salaam." One of the men said. He wore a trimmed black beard, and his head was covered with a keffiyeh. He wore a dark blue outer cloak over a white robe. He smiled. Pervides and Samson looked at each other, and Samson waved. They both smiled. "Geia." The man said pleasantly.

"Italian." Pervides said quickly.

"Ah." The man looked genuinely pleased. "Finally. Greetings friends."

"Greetings."

"You look as though you might use some help. Unless I am mistaken you have been out here awhile."

"Yes. We were stranded on that island," Samson said pointing, "for over a year."

"And well you look it." The man laughed. "My name is Karim. This is my ship." He paused a moment. There was pride in his eyes. "Where are you headed?"

"To Genoa, eventually."

Karim whistled. "A long way in such a small boat." He put his hand to his chin and stroked his beard. He said something in Arabic to the two men with him. One of them bowed and walked to the cabin and the stern of the ship. "You are soldiers?"

"Merchants." Pervides answered. "Our ship was lost with a load of olive oil and silk destined for Athens. We have been ruined by the disaster, but at least we are alive."

"Over a year you say?" Karim said. "Amazing. Allah be praised."

"Where are you headed?" Samson asked as a pause engulfed them.

"Cordoba. I, like you, am a merchant. My hull is full to the brim with cargo, although I could accommodate a little more weight." His smile was mischievous.

"Thank you, no. Cordoba is a bit far from Genoa."

"Yes, of course. Although, you could always catch a ship from Spain. At least one to Rome. See, I just worry about that little boat. Allah spared you once. Why test nature a second time?"

"Thank you for your concern." Pervides bowed slightly. "But we built this with our own hands. It is a strong vessel, and it will suffice."

"Very well." Karim bowed respectfully. "Ah, Aziz." The third man returned, carrying an armful of clothes. "At least accept these gifts."

"Thank you."

The last of the three men, who had not moved through the entire conversation, called to a sailor in Arabic and was brought a rope. He threw one end to Samson. He was a stern looking man, nearly clean shaven, except for a thick black moustache. "I will pull you close." He said in slow Greek before he threw the rope.

"He will pull you in." Karim translated. "I'm afraid no one else speaks your tongue here. Say," he added excitedly, "how would you care to join me for dinner? How does salted mutton, bread and wine sound?" When he received no immediate answer, he continued. "Good, it's settled. Mohammed, help our guests aboard. Aziz." He continued in Arabic. Mohammed pulled the boat tight against the ship, and they tied it off with three ropes. Mohammed then reached down to the boat and helped Pervides climb aboard. As he held Pervides' arm, he bent down and whispered in Greek.

"I know you understand. Our cargo is slaves. Do not drink the wine. I will help you escape if you take me with you. Tell your friend."

Pervides, once on deck, reached down to help Samson. He whispered quickly, "Slave ship. Don't drink the wine. Mohammed will help us." Samson squeezed his arm in recognition. As both men straightened themselves on deck, Karim returned.

"Welcome, friends, to my ship. Now, we eat." Aziz, followed by two sailors, emerged from the cabin. One sailor lay out three rugs on the deck, while Aziz and the second sailor set the meal between them. "Please sit." Karim motioned to the carpets.

As they seated themselves Aziz filled two mugs with wine and a third with honey water, which he set before Karim.

"You do not join us?" Pervides said in a friendly tone.

"It is forbidden. I only keep wine for," he paused just slightly, "guests. You are businessmen. You understand."

"Oh yes, the drunker a man, the easier you can cheat him." Pervides winked. "Still, where I come from it is an insult to drink another man's wine unless he drinks first."

"Really? Well, in the situation, let custom be dismissed. I shall drink my honeyed water first, and it shall count as wine. Fine?"

"I accept that interpretation." Pervides smiled merrily and made to take a swig of wine but before the fluid touched his lips, he set his mug down amidst a bout of dry heaving. "I apologize." He said when the gagging had ceased. "I am sure it is fine wine, but after such a plain diet for so long, my body seems to have no taste for alcohol."

"So it seems." Karim said abstractedly as he reached for a slice of mutton. "Now, tell me," he said as he took a bite, "what it was like on the island?"

"Life changing." Samson answered as he took a slice of meat and a piece of bread. They tasted better than he would have ever imagined such plain, stale, food could taste. His mug of wine remained in front of him, untouched.

"How so?"

"Let's just say one sees things differently after an experience like that. To lose everything makes one appreciate more the things one did have and will hopefully have again."

"Money is always out there to be had young friend. You will have new ships and new cargoes with which to make your fortune."

"I did not speak of money."

"What else? Oh, is the young man romantic? It is not worth it, I say. I have five wives. I am never so happy as when I am away from them." His boisterous laugh was mimicked, in softer tones, by his guests. "You do not drink either, young friend?" He said after wiping a tear from his eye.

"I do not wish the same fate as my friend."

"Very well. Do you wish any more to eat? I have some apricots I was saving for myself. Would you care for some?"

"No thank you." Samson answered. "I've already eaten more than I have in any two days for the last year."

"Yes," Pervides added, "thank you for your hospitality, but we best be getting under way. I want to make landfall before it gets dark."

"Well, Allah be with you in your journey. Oh, wait. The clothing. Aziz!" Karim spoke for about a minute to Aziz and then turned to Pervides and Samson. "He will get them. He forgot about them while getting the meal."

"Once again." Pervides said standing. Samson followed him and stretched his arms skyward. "Thank you. May your kindness bring you good fortune." They were backing toward their boat. There were suddenly half a dozen sailors with swords drawn circling them. Aziz had shackles in his hands.

"I urge you not to leave." Karim said with a smile. He laughed boisterously as before. "I told you; I am a businessman. You understand. I can't let good profit just walk away, now can I?"

The unexpected twang of a bow interrupted the scene and an arrow arced from the far side of the deck, through the sail and into the mast. It was aflame and the sails burst into fire even before the second arrow struck a few feet below the first. In that same instant Pervides and Samson made a dash for their boat, in the process knocking one sailor, who looked up at the flames, into the water. Samson raised the sail as Pervides quickly cut the ropes. The boat surged forward, and as it reached the prow of the ship, Mohammed launched himself into the water in front of them. Both men caught him by an arm and pulled him from the water. Looking back, Mohammed laughed. "Good work, my friends." Men were scampering about the ship to put out the flames. The one sailor was still treading in the water. "Relax." He said, noticing the faces of his companions. "I cut all the bow strings, and it will take them hours to fix the sail. By then we can be out of sight."

"Thank you." Pervides said with a relaxed smile. He translated for Samson, who also relaxed. "You never learned Greek?" He asked Samson.

"I could only learn what my tutor knew."

"Very true. Now, Mohammed..."

"Please, my name is Nichodemus. I went by Mohammed to appear Muslim."

"You are not?"

"No. I am Christian, born to a Greek father and a Persian mother. She too is Christian."

"How did you end up on that ship?"

"I am a sailor and a navigator. Karim paid more than anyone else. I did not know what the cargo was when I signed on. It was terrible, seeing those men crammed into that hold, listening to Karim bicker over the price of each. I had to inspect them to make sure they were okay, like they were stock. It was terrible. That was in Cairo. I would have jumped ship there, but where would I have gone? What could I have done? Then this, abducting castaways. I could not do it."

"For that, we thank you."

"To where do we sail?"

"Genoa."

"Yes, I thought I heard you say that. I have family in Rome. It is on the way. If you could drop me there, I..."

"Certainly. Are we really that far south then?"

"Oh yes."

"And west."

"Yes. Around this island is another. Then we head northeast, and we shall arrive at the Italian shore near Rome. I will navigate if you wish."

"Thank you. We really had no idea where we were." Pervides proceeded to tell Nichodemus the true origins and destination of their ship, as well as their time on the island.

"You did right," Nichodemus said after listening quietly, "building this boat. The seas are no place to take anything built too lightly. Trust me. My family has been on the seas for more than a thousand years. So what of you two? What is your trade? You have not mentioned."

"I am, I suppose, a man capable of many things, but of trade, I have none. I have always considered myself simply as a human being. Had things gone the way they have for most in my family that would have meant farmer, hunter, husband, father, logger, weaver, butcher, tanner and any other task which needed hands to be finished. As it is, I do as I need to accomplish one thing." Pervides shook a single finger in the air, as if reminding himself all that the solitary word represented.

"Which is?"

"Vengeance." He stared at the sea for a moment. "As for our friend Samson. He is a noble man. His duties thus far have been but to learn so he may one day take the place of his father."

"A noble man?" Nichodemus chuckled. "I wish Karim knew that. It would anger him even more. A nobleman in ransom is worth far more than any two slaves."

Chapter Eighteen

In a nondescript house along a nondescript street in one of the quietest neighborhoods of Rome, a man and his wife were sitting down to a meal of porridge, beef, sweet peas, water and wine.

"Thank you, my dear," said the man, rubbing his hands together before picking up a wooden spoon and driving it into his porridge. He stopped before lifting the utensil and let it rest against the side of the dish. "Almost forgot. Bow your head Diana. Father in Heaven..." He prayed, eventually arriving at the requisite, "amen."

"Amen." His wife repeated. She took her spoon and sampled the porridge before slicing off a piece of beef and eating it with her hands.

"This is very good. Thank you Diana."

"You're welcome Ulysses. It is the same as we had last night."

"Still good." He said with a mouth full of porridge. There was a knock at the door. "Who on earth?" He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "It better be important to take a man from his meal." He lifted his bulky frame from his chair with help of the table. Walking to the door he further wiped his hands on his hips. A fit man in his younger days, he had grown with each year beyond his forty-fifth birthday, when he set into port for the final time. He now owned a small shop which sold maps. Business did well enough to keep him fat, but not so well as to allow his wife to also become fat. She was merely plump. But she had always been so, or at least from the day he laid eyes on her while attending church in Patras, while in port by chance on the Sabbath. Patras soon became his port of choice, and after years of sporadic courtship, they were married in the church where they met.

Ulysses unbolted the door with a grunt. He swung the door open and strained for a moment to connect the face with his memory. "Nichodemus!" He said loudly and clasped his nephew into a great hug. "Come in, come in. Diana, dear, it's Nichodemus. Why, when did you get into Rome? Come, come sit down. Ah, and you've brought friends. Excuse my rudeness."

"Uncle, Pervides and Samson." Nichodemus paused so they could shake hands. "My uncle Ulysses and my lovely aunt Diana." He embraced her warmly, and then she shook hands with the strangers.

"No offense," Ulysses said lightly, "but you fellows look a bit worn. Where did my nephew dig you up?"

"A fair enough question." Samson answered. "He rescued us from becoming slaves."

"From my own captain, mind you." Nichodemus interrupted. "The blackguard never told me what cargo he shipped when I signed on." His uncle nodded knowingly. "They were stranded on an island. Built their own boat. Pretty fine one at that. I'll have to show it to you before they leave."

"So your nephew saved us and jumped ship at the same time." Samson continued. "Then he steered us here to Rome. Who knows where we would have ended up without him."

"Ah, tales of the sea. How they take me back. Well, sit down boys. Say, have you eaten? We haven't much, but I am sure we can come up with something."

"We have eaten." Nichodemus answered. "We ran out of food on the boat this morning. The extra man really made these fellows' rations go a bit quicker than they expected."

"That fine meal you bought us at the pub made up for it plenty." Samson said.

"Well then, how about some wine?" Ulysses offered. Pervides, Samson and Nichodemus broke into laughter. "What's this all about?"

"Sit down uncle. I'll pour the wine, and we will tell you all about it."

Ulysses listened nostalgically to the adventures at sea, first of the rescue, then of the shipwreck and many months of isolation.

"Nineteen months." He said when they were finished. "I could not imagine it. I was shipwrecked for three weeks once, and that was plenty long. One of the fellows went mad. An Angle, though. Never did figure out why he was sailing these waters. Couldn't understand much he said really. But boy did he go. Took to running about stark naked and saying he was a king. We nearly killed him a couple of times, my mate and I, but we felt sorry for him. Plus, who knows, we might have ended up like him. Then, the day before we were rescued, he puts his clothes on and, real gentlemanly like, walks up to us and says, 'it has been a pleasure.' Then he turns, walks into the sea and starts swimming out. Kept going until he drowned, I guess. Damnedest thing I ever saw. But nineteen months. I've heard of such things, but you boys sure seem quite healthy, mind you, after such a time."

"Thank you." Pervides answered.

"A bit on the filthy side though." Ulysses laughed. "That's okay; we'll clean you up tomorrow. A nice warm bath. Some new clothes. You'll feel like kings."

Chapter Nineteen

Something had changed Samson realized. Perception. He was seated before the Marquis di Alivo, a man he had once revered. Now, he was simply a man. An aging man at that.

"How dreadful it must have been for you Samson." The marquis was saying. Samson had just finished a short, lifeless, retelling of his adventure. He had come to the marquis for money. "Thank God you are alive though. Your father will be quite thrilled. Why, we all thought you were dead."

"I should have been."

"Yes, you mentioned that. This man who saved you; this..."

"Pervides."

"Yes. I should like to meet him. Bring him to supper tonight. My wife will be absolutely ecstatic. You know how she has always doted on you. She took it quite hard when she heard... Almost as if you were her own son. Grandson I guess is more appropriate." He looked at Samson as if he had only now taken full notice of him. "You are thin, my boy. And with that beard I barely recognize you. But you still have your mother's eyes. You have always reminded me of her Samson, and my brother. I can see him in you now, your grandfather. He was a good man. You, grand nephew, are the last of his line. You and your brother, but Lucius is too much like your father. Di Gregoire not di Alivo." He smiled with a little more emotion than a man of his position was wont to show. "My, it is good to see you alive. Now, go, fetch your friend to supper." The marquis arose from his chair and led Samson to the door of his study. "Thank God," he said, grasping Samson's shoulder warmly, "you are alive."

Samson smiled, bowed slightly and left the room. The marquis retreated to a couch in the corner of the room and lowered himself gently onto the cushions. "My marquise is not lost." He said softly out loud. "Such men of promise are few in this world." He yawned, lay back and dozed off with a gentle look of relief on his face. When he awoke the last rays of sunlight were retreating from his room. Rising, he walked to the window and looked over the courtyard. Two servants passed beneath. One carried wood. The other a waste bucket.

"Good day Titus." He heard one say clearly, though he was three stories overhead.

"Evening John. How've you been?"

"Good. Yourself?"

"Pretty good. Had a bit of sickness last week, but pretty good now."

"Is that where you were hiding? I though you finally ran of with that Susan you're always going on about."

"No, no. She still won't give me the time of day." They both laughed loudly. "I'll see you around John. Say, will you be down at the pub tonight? There's supposed to have some German musicians, of all things. It ought to be worth a pint."

"Definitely. I'll try to make it. Have a good one Titus."

"John."

The two men continued with their errands. The marquis could hear Titus' heavy breathing beneath the burden of wood. Every time his left foot hit the ground he grunted. John, further on, paused to briefly chat with the guards at the side gate before vanishing to empty his foul burden. The guards were laughing, and the marquis strained to recognize their faces. There were too many. Too many servants. Too many soldiers. All there for him. So he could stand there watching and wonder how long it was until supper would be set before him. So he did not have to make the trip to the well to get a bucket of water or chop the kindling to start a fire. All these people to do all these many tasks so he could, what? Just because? The marquis smiled to himself. It was ridiculous, he realized, to think of things like that. Things were the way they were. He had been born privileged. These others had not. There was no should in any of it. Should. "The forgotten question." Pervides had called it the first time they met. A moral man, that one.

"The majority of men are brutes." The marquis had said somewhere in the conversation. He could not remember how they arrived at such a subject or for that matter how Pervides had garnered an audience with him. It was some two years earlier, at his estate in Venice. "They are violent and lustful; rude derisive and will sell anyone for a piece of gold."

"Yes." Pervides had answered quite simply. "That does not mean they should be."

"No?" The marquis had laughed. "Men have always lived by the hand of force. We are no better now. Why, if the coliseum was reopened, there would be greater lines today to watch men dice each other into bloody bits. Place theater steps along the battlefield, and you will learn how perverse we humans are. Go to any road or public house and watch the drunkards brawl. There is your human being, his blurry eyes proud companions to his bloody fists. Go into the farmhouse or lord's deep corridors. There you will find men who smash their wives with their fists and slander their neighbors with their tongues. You will see subtle stares of animal superiority as men look upon the suffering of others and feel not pity but raised up that they are better."

"You speak as if these things are wrong."

"Why, yes, I believe they are."

"But others do not?"

"How could they, if they do them?"

"Likely they never consider whether they should act as such, only whether they can. You are right. There is a perverseness in all of us, and lest we ask whether we should do things we will act in such ways without thinking at all. We can all crush an ant and feel god-like in the enormity of our scale. Does this mean we should? Or, if he nips first at us, is it then within our right to end his life? And if it is not an ant but a lion? Or a man? That we can have another man work our field as a slave, does this mean we should? What of him; that slave? What does he feel? What does he think? And more so, what is he capable of thinking? What would he do if given the time to pursue his own wishes instead of yours? If his time was his own, would he view things the same? Would he still laugh when he sees the dying man on the side of the road or the ant smeared beneath his heel? It is not about what man is or has been. It is about what he might be. About what he should be." He paused. "Who are you?"

"The Marquis di Alivo."

"When you close your eyes, who are you?"

"The same."

"To yourself, are you not 'I'?"

"Yes."

"To myself, am I not 'I'?"

"Yes."

"And the slave, the merchant, the barmaid, wife, child, are they not 'I' to themselves?"

"Yes, but I do not see the point."

"The point, my lord, is that we are equal, if in no other way than in the basic way we perceive ourselves. None of us can ever be anything but 'I' in our own minds. No matter how close we become, to wife, god or anything else, we cannot alter the fact that we perceive the world as 'I', no matter what term or lack of term we choose to name or rename it."

"Very well. What has this to do with should?"

"That once we accept that all others perceive themselves as we perceive ourselves, they also are capable of the same feelings, good and bad, that we are capable of. Which leads to a different way of looking at and treating others. Because the next person is no longer just a thing but an 'I'. This leads to the process of constructing in one's own mind the possible reaction of that 'I', not only to occurrences in life in general but in how one acts towards others. Eventually things are regarded in the fashion; I would not like to dig a ditch for fourteen hours a day, therefore I will not ask this other fellow to do it unless he is equally compensated for his toil. Some things must be done. People must eat. People must stay dry and warm. Ideally they must be entertained. The end goal of every 'I' is to be happy. By completing these things which must be done together, each 'I' may obtain the freedom, the time, to pursue this happiness, and what more achieve this happiness while doing the things which must be done. To dig in the earth for an hour or two can be quite enjoyable. To do so from dawn to dusk, day after day, is not, except to maybe one man in a million. Truly perceiving that every individual is 'I' prevents me from attempting to use or deceive others for I cannot do unto this 'I' that which would cause myself grievance. It will not allow me to store up wealth on the unhappy lives of overworked men."

"So you would have everyone suffer instead of just some."

"I would have everyone share the burden of that which must be done. Beyond that, all bearing different perception of life and different routes to happiness, all should be free to pursue their own whims, provided they do not disturb or harm anyone else. No one should be forced to do anything, except that which is necessary to exist as a human being. If some men are brutes and wish to break and be broken by war, let them in their own time brutalize each other. But no one should be forced to fight. Nor should anyone be forced to harvest the field of grain. But, if he does not share in the harvesting, he does not share in the yield. If ten men sow and reap a plot of land, the eleventh has no right to it."

"What if he provides something? Say, protection."

"Protection? From whom. Other eleventh men? There are many kinds of thieves my lord. Some rob by force, others coercion. Some merely convince the others they hold some merit they cannot understand simply by being alive or a skill worth ten times what it should be."

"So, in your opinion, my time, my life, is worth no more than that of the meanest slave."

"In your eyes, it is. In his, it is not, or at least it should not be. I do not claim to know any grand philosophical or religious truth which determines a life. I know only that, in my perception, time is the one thing equal among all men. Yet it is the thing most often stolen."

"Young man, where did you learn such ideas?"

"These were the ideals by which I was bred, not so much in words but in practice. I lived in a place where men lived by such unique equality. It was not until I was banished that I began to conceptualize how the way of life there varied from elsewhere and what was the root of that difference. The people of Qoh existed with a collective individualism which embodied everything I have said."

"Qoh? It sounds strikingly familiar."

"It was a village five miles to the north of the town di Gregoire, abode of your nephew, by marriage, Simeon, Count di Gregoire, who some years ago ordered and lead the absolute annihilation of said Qoh, murdering each of the one hundred and sixteen residents and burning every last cottage to the ground. A mining town of shanties stands there now, and every ounce of gold pulled from the hills lines the coffers of the count. My lord, he destroyed not just any place but a place where men were free, where men knew they were free and the brutish reality you claim as the inherent persona of humanity did not exist. It was my home, but more than that, it was hope."

"Hope?"

"That with each passing generation at least a handful of children would be raised upon the ideals of peace, and perhaps, someday, those ideals would spread, bit by bit, through the rest of humanity."

The two men looked at each other silently.

"What do you want of me?" The marquis asked after a moment.

"Justice."

"I can do nothing to the count."

"I know, but you have the wealth to buy an army large enough to kill him and as many of those who carried out the deed as still work for him."

"That is true." The marquis rubbed his chin. "Why would I buy you an army? What do I receive in return?"

"The gold mines of Qoh."

"I have no need..."

"And me."

"You? Are you worth so much as that?"

"If used correctly, perhaps."

"And if you die in your war?" Pervides did not answer. "Here is my offer. The mines; I do not need them. If it is your family land, they should be yours. As for the money, consider it a loan. If you should prevail, you will repay me from your mines. Agreed?"

"Yes, but..."

"As for you, I will require of you a service in advance." The marquis paused. When he spoke again his voice was resonate of a mind being pulled into the past. "Whether you like it or not Pervides, there is nobility. I am a marquis, and my son, was he alive, would have also been a marquis. I am growing old and soon; well I have not so many years left. Let us leave it at that. I must choose an heir, and this is no light choice. You have been wronged by power borne by the hands of a tyrant." His voice became soft. "Lord Simeon's eldest son, Samson. He is a kind, passionate youth. I think even you would find in him the potential to be a good man. Samson is my grand-nephew. He will be my heir. This must never be spoken. Not while his father is alive. Many are the hours I have stressed over what Simeon would do if he knew his son was to become marquis. So, you see, you present a solution. It is, perhaps, not the best, but you have cause for vengeance. Still." He looked at the ground, thinking. Then, finally, "My task for you is this. There has been a call for armies to assemble in Rome to launch an expedition against the Saracens. Simeon intends to send Samson. Follow him. Keep him alive. When he has been returned safely to his home, then I will lend you the money to wage your revenge. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"It is settled then. Only, tell me this. How do you, by your morals you so proudly speak, justify that which you intend to do?"

"A man has always the right to defend himself, and sometimes, the only way to defeat brute force is with justified force."

"So you will kill out of justice?"

"Yes, and so that such a man may never do the same again. Perhaps I fall short of every moral a man should have, but in no sense could I live in a world where such villainy reins unopposed."

Chapter Twenty

There would be days when Samson would remember this moment and become so absorbed with memory he would lose track of all else. The journey was at an end. Home was there, before him, peeking as if from a dream between the fog and clouds. A hill above heaven. A dull gray stone beacon of the past and future, entreating, beckoning. The horse beneath him, tired, sighed as they stood still. The days were falling now. Yesterday. A day last year when he sat on the island shore and held a blood red rock in his palm. They were one. All the moments of hunger, of misery and droll labor were now a single undecipherable portion of his being which from time to time swept through his mind like a wave. Then it was gone.

"Home?" Pervides asked simply. He stood beside the horse. The other had died two days earlier after breaking its leg in a muddy hole along the road. They had been riding in turns.

"Yes." Samson answered. There was a sparkle in his voice. "Home."

"How far."

"Walking? A few hours. The village is less."

A fox broke through the bushes at their left and ambled onto the road. Its eyes scanned as it held its head low to the ground. It was searching for something. The horse shuffled its hooves, and the fox glanced at the men. It darted out of sight. Samson nudged the horse, and they set off at a walk. Their footsteps were muffled in a mist, and the wild creaking of the trees circled them; now to the left, now to the right. A bird called. A moment later the same tenor from a different location. The thudding flap of raven's wings. Silence, except the groaning trees, swaying, reaching for the sun behind the clouds. Forever reaching. A leaf fell across the road, and suddenly Samson stopped. Pervides looked up towards him. His face was quivering with emotion. His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, and tears were forming at his eyes. He dismounted and ever so slowly trod forward alone, weeping, smiling. On the road ahead lay Diadem, her tail beating in the dust, a proud gesture in her bearing, as if she had been waiting all this time in the very spot and today had been proven true. He knelt and crawled the final yard to her, and she rose to softly lick his face. He embraced her, burying his head in her soft fur. His eyes wept with happiness. Hers shone with joy.

"My dear, dear, friend." He said. "How you have changed. Have you not eaten well Diadem? Where have your muscles gone that so proudly carried you by my side? And this grey upon your muzzle? Why there was no trace before. You have grown old my friend. Still, we shall have many days yet. It is good to see you Diadem. Very good." He rubbed beneath her chin, and she nuzzled against his side. They were alone for a time. Entirely alone. Then there were footsteps, and both turned toward the oncoming road. A young man appeared, running, and coming to a halt, he panted for lack of breath.

"Thank you sir." He said between breaths. "For finding my dog."

"This is your beast?" Samson questioned.

"She is in my care. Her master has died, though she hardly knows it. Why, she has spent every day since he left pining away, staring off down the road he took some many months ago. Then today, off she goes. I've had a devil of a time tracking her down."

"She has waited all this time?"

"Yes. It's a shame too. She was such a fine dog, but now she's just skin and bones. She hardly eats. Hardly runs. A shame, like I said."

"Ah, she is a fine dog yet." Samson said as he scratched Diadem's ears. "Plenty of years left in her now her master is home." Diadem made a pleasurable little bark and shoved her face beneath Samson's arm as if to emphasize the point. The young man stepped back. He looked hard at Samson; into his eyes.

"Is it you, my lord?" He said after a moment. His eyes were still not convinced.

"Yes Paulus." Samson rose to his feet. His bearing was unmistakable.

"But, you are dead." The words were said nearly to himself.

"Not yet." Samson smiled.

Paulus fell at Samson's feet and clutched around his knees. His tears were warm against Samson's thigh, and Samson placed his open hand on Paulus' head. Diadem nuzzled between the two, and they laughed. Samson helped Paulus to his feet and clasped him around the shoulder with his arm.

"Unbelievable." Paulus murmured as they turned and walked toward Pervides, who was waiting with the horse. Paulus' happy face grew stern. "Marcus?" He asked forlornly.

"Your brother is gone." Samson answered. He closed his eyes and remembered. "We can speak of it, if you wish."

"Later, perhaps, my lord." Diadem ran on ahead and introduced herself to Pervides.

"Diadem?" Pervides asked as the two men neared.

"The same." Samson answered. "And this is Paulus. I left my dog in the care of a child, and I return to find my dog grown old and the child become a man. Paulus, this is Pervides. I owe him my life."

"In that case, I thank you sir, and I am honored to have your acquaintance.

"Likewise." They bowed to each other.

"Now," Samson said merrily, "shall we go home?"

Chapter Twenty-one

When they walked through the castle gates, the guards took little notice of them. "Found the old girl, did you Paulus?" One of the soldiers said kindly as they passed.

"Oh yes." Paulus said with a twinkle in his eyes. Samson had forbid him to reveal his identity. They paused before the manor steps before turning to the side door.

"Soldier." Samson said authoritatively when the guard balked to let Paulus enter with the two strangers. "Would you dare refuse a man entry to his own home?"

"No sir. The boy and the dog are welcome to enter. You and your companion, however, must be identified and announced in the appropriate manner."

"I am of noble birth; how dare you delay me."

"My lord, if you shall give me your name, I shall announce you immediately and you shall be welcomed accordingly."

"Ah, you are a smooth one. What is your name soldier?"

"Abner Vilni, sir."

"Well, let the count know that the Viscount of Qoh awaits at his front door."

"But sir," the soldier said cautiously, "the Viscount of Qoh is the count's son."

"I am aware of that."

"Can you be?"

"Do not gawk all day Abner Vilni. Call for the main doors to be opened so that I might seek out my father. And do not announce me." He added as Abner turned to speak to the guard inside. A few moments later the two great doors opened. Samson dismounted, and with Diadem at his side, led Pervides and Paulus up the steps. A stranger procession may have never passed through the doors. The young squire, his scrawny frame only just beginning to fill out into the manhood. His gait light with happiness; a sixteen year old who had just witnessed his hero's resurrection from the grave. The old dog with her white muzzle and arthritic limbs walking proudly once more after so many months lurking in the corners with her head held down. The bearded stranger and returning son, their faces yet gaunt and eyes filled with the deep memories of privation, their new clothes worn on the journey from Rome. They walked with a great tiredness, yet in their gait was the undeniable impression of life.

"Pardon, how may I be of service to you?" Duncan said as he met them at the end of the wide entry way. His words echoed against the stone walls hidden behind the richly woven tapestries. He bowed lowly as he spoke. His eyes searched the newcomers for indication of their rank. Samson passed him without a word and opened the doors to the great hall. Pervides and Diadem followed, while Paulus lingered behind.

"Who is he?" Duncan asked. The two stood at the doorway. Paulus did not answer, and Duncan entered the hall. Paulus followed and closed the door behind him. He took a single step and stopped, joining the remainder of the room in silence. Some two dozen people were present. Among them were a number of pages, servants and advisors. The count sat at the high table at the far end of the hall. Two townsmen stood before him. One had been pleading his case before the count, in which he accused his comrade of failing to fulfill a promissory note due the previous week. He had just produced the note when the doors opened, and two strangers and a familiar dog walked in. The door thundered as it hit against the walls, and all eyes turned to them. They approached the count without ceremony. The bewildered townsmen backed out of their way. Pervides and Diadem stopped five paces from the high table, while Samson stepped forward to the platform. Two guards drew their swords and blocked his path, although they bowed respectfully. Samson gave a short smile before kneeling. He bowed his head and then looked his father directly in his eyes. Simeon, whose face had worn a look of bemusement suddenly sat up in his chair. He leaned forward, raising himself slightly on the palms, which he spread on the table.

"Does my sight deceive me? I see the eyes of my son. It cannot be." Samson rose to his feet and, dismissing the guards with a wave of his hand, approached Simeon. "Yes." Simeon smiled. "It is indeed my son come home at last." Across the table the two men embraced. Murmurs of disbelief arose from the crowd. "My son has returned." The count slumped back in his chair as if he had suddenly grown weak. "And now tell

me Samson. Why, how strange it is to utter that name again. And to see you here before me, so changed, yet surely the child I have always known. Quick, someone fetch Lucius. Tell him his brother has come home.” Two pages scurried off. “Now, Samson, tell me, where have you been while for so long we thought you dead? Come, sit beside your father.”

“Thank you father.” Samson said as he stepped back two steps. “But first let me introduce my companion, without whom I would today be lost beneath the waves.”

“Certainly. Certainly.” The count said merrily.

“Father, may I present Pervides.” Samson turned and held out one arm to his friend. Pervides walked toward the count, stopped beside Samson and turned to him. He bowed to Samson and then spoke in determined voice.

“I have fulfilled my word and accompanied you to your home. Regardless of what happens in the future, I shall always hold you in the deepest friendship, but I can remain no longer beneath the roof, or in the presence, of the man who murdered my family and burned my village to the ground.” With this he made a second short bow to Samson, turned his back on the count and strode confidently from the room. All eyes were on the count. His face was red with anger, but it subsided before he spoke.

“Who is that man?” He asked coldly.

“That, father,” Samson answered with realization, “is the last man of Qoh.”

“And have you reason why I should not order him thrown in the dungeon for his disrespect?”

“I owe him my life, and above that, he is my friend.”

“Very well, let him go. What is it to me? Come, sit. Tell us of your adventures young man. Let that peasant go.”

Samson looked at his father thoughtfully. “A later time, perhaps. I am weary from my journey. By your leave, I shall retire until supper.”

“Yes, of course. We shall feast to your return. Welcome home son.”

Samson turned and followed the path Pervides had taken. He tried not to hurry, but he was anxious to catch him before he left.

“Open the door.” He commanded as he reached the main entrance. The guards complied, and the open space revealed a familiar face ascending the steps.

“Samson!” His brother greeted him as he mounted the stairs. He bounded to the doorway and wrapped Samson in a hug. “Why, you old devil, it is a shock to see you. I knew it. They all said you were dead, but I knew you were alive.”

Samson was not listening. He was looking down the road at a single horsemen moving gradually out of sight.

Chapter Twenty-two

The squirrel was curled up in his hold, his lengthy tail wrapped around his body and a contented expression on his face. He looked almost like a furry little man dreaming away the night without a care in the world. Now and then he would nibble in his slumber, whether at imaginary food or simply in reflex it is impossible to know. Then, very near, a trumpet blast, and he unfurled himself with alarm. Poking his head out of the hole, he was met with a second trumpet blaring directly beneath his home.

The trumpeter lowered his horn and stood awaiting further orders. Beside him a dozen horses pawed the ground. On each a man in stout leather armor, a few knotted with bits of metal. Before them stood four hundred eighty-three men garbed in various fashions, brandishing weapons ranging from sword to threshing flail. One hundred ten carried bows. They stood in the first three ranks, forty men abreast.

“We seem to outnumber them.” One of the men on horseback said. It was yet early in the morning, and the clouds were low overhead, blocking the sun behind a swirling fog of radiance.

“Yes, hmmm.” A second officer answered. “Who are these bastards anyway? What do they want?”

“Me.” Lord Simeon answered. His face was stoic. He said no more. He did not add that the challenge had been worded to the effect that if he, the count, would face Pervides in single combat no one else would

need die. Oh no, no one knew that. In his youth he would have accepted. He had on two occasions, and by his victories two battles had been averted. But now? Against a commoner? He would not meet such a man. He would crush him and his army. It was bewildering though. In three months the man had summoned some four hundred men to his side. It did not add up. Someone else must have been behind it. One of the neighboring barons or perhaps even Abbot Rinaldo. He had never fully agreed with that man. He had power the count could not challenge. A threat. He had always viewed him as a threat. Who else? It would come out afterwards. It always did. It could not possibly be that Pervides. A wanted man. He had viewed the records. Killer of the count's deer. Savior of his son. Corrupter of his son, it would seem as well. What would he do with that boy? "No." He said when Simeon asked him to fight by his side. "I believe his cause is just." He had said when his father pried. "You desire your father dead?" "No, but I will not wage war against a cause that is just." He had him locked in his room with that ratty old dog of his. His own son. No, he would not believe Samson was capable of arranging it. Of all the things he was, he was not underhanded. Sometimes Simeon felt that Samson did not even want to be count. No, he could have had no hand in it. But a coincidence? He spent all that time alone with the man. If indeed they were stranded on an island. Perhaps they had raised the army together. Had he misjudged his son? An eye would be kept on the boy after this. A very close eye. Ah, but to matters at hand. The enemy was approaching, separated into three groups a few dozen steps apart. It would be a good day for blood. A good day. A good place too. Fifty-three years had passed since his father had won a battle in the very spot. That was the last time anyone had dared challenge the strength of the Gregoires. Fifty-three years, and then this. An army of four hundred materializing from the woods without warning. A note. A challenge. He scrambled to march the army he had out to the field. He would not let these rogues disrupt his lands. He would crush them now, before they had done the slightest harm. That he had the thousand men he could have summoned in a fortnight. But these were sufficient.

An arrow shot from the far side of the field. It landed short of his troops by a dozen yards. He looked at his nobles. "Our archers would have the same results, my lord." One of them responded to his gaze. The enemy moved forward a few yards. A second arrow. Ten yards short. "What is the sense in this?" Someone asked as the enemy again edged forward. "Bad eyes I guess." Someone answered. "They can't tell their distance." No, Simeon thought. It was not that. A third arrow. Five yards. "Ready the archers." He ordered, but no sooner than he said the words did the enemy archers loose a bombardment. The arrows burrowed into his archers. Such a simple trick, he thought. Have the weakest man mark the range. His archers returned fire and for a few minutes the battlefield was filled with the whizzing of arrows. Men were screaming. Blood was being spilt. "Advance!" Simeon ordered. The order was relayed, and scores of men surged forward toward the enemy. Handfuls of arrows roamed the sky, but soon the final burst was put to rest and a brief moment of beating footsteps overwhelmed all else before the clashing of metal and flesh began. Simeon spurred his horse, and his officers aligned at his flanks. There were no horse on the other side. He was riding with excitement. The same old feeling he always felt upon the doorstep of the moment. It rose in him from his stomach; a tingling, mouth drying, anticipation that made nearly everything else in life seem ridiculously dull. This was his arena. The playground of his youth. How he had missed it.

His spear lodged in a soldier's chest. The man fell backward, and the handle was torn from Simeon's grasp. It wobbled in the air as the man spent the last agonizing minutes of his life attempting to draw the point from his heart. Simeon drew his sword and dismounted. The smell of blood invigorated him. The chaos made him feel young, alive. He was a man. These all were men, breathing, living, dying the best death. His arms burned with tension as his blade met another. A second, third, fourth time. Then the triumph. The same old feeling of superiority. A lingering, indefinable relief. He retrieved his spear and ascended his horse. At the far side of the field three dozen horsemen entered the battle. The enemy had reached his right flank. It would be a bloody day.

Chapter Twenty-three

Pervides had watched Simeon from the beginning. Entering now on horseback he watched the count mount his horse before meeting with the first of his foes. The man managed to maim his horse, though in the

process he was trampled under hoof. Pervides left him beneath the struggling beast. A lull surrounded him. His horsemen drove the enemy into a net of foot soldiers. A pocket of two dozen men were surrounded by fifty. Pervides watched the slaughter in bewilderment. For him they fought and died. Yes, it was for the money he placed in their hands, but because of him these men died and bled today. It was his grievance, his ordeal. That all this should happen; it was ghastly. Absolutely ridiculous. A final soldier stood in the middle of the pocket. Surrounded on all sides he turned with sword in hand, silent, waiting. Two men lunged at him. He fought them off. A third struck the back of his leg, and he fell to one knee. Still he defiantly handled his sword and challenged his attackers. An axe fell in his back, and he collapsed. Retrieving his weapon, the axeman trod on the back of the fallen man's skull, desecrating his face on the ground. Pervides hated him. He hated them all. All these men he bought for gold. All the men the count owned. That they all died; it would be no loss.

The battle was near again. The sound overwhelmed. Screams and the thrashing of weapons. Curses and horse hooves. An occasional bow. The groveling sound of men attempting to pull themselves from battle, attempting to live. He gripped his sword firmly. It became part of him, and he swung with precision. A slice across a man's face. His eye gushed blood. The man waved blindly with his club. Pervides embedded his blade in the soldier's gut. The man slid off the steel with an indescribable soft sound. He landed in a clump and spat blood. A short laugh. "Aha!" He said, his eyes opening wide. Silence. He fell sideways on his face. Pervides moved on.

The battle was a draw. It oscillated about the bloody line of contact where the two masses of men mingled and swayed. Overlooking all sat the squirrel in his tree. He nibbled on an acorn and tilted his head in seeming bewilderment, as if confused by the writhing mass of giants before him. When the battle drew near he would dart into his hole, but he always returned to sit on his haunches and watch the bloodshed. For three hours the numbers thinned. A madman took to the count's wounded and slaughtered the bleeding men on the ground. He laughed the entire time. At length his deed was noticed and a cool retribution was undertaken on the injured in Pervides' camp. Two men fled. A dozen more the next hour. At five hours, fifty-eight men remained of the nearly nine hundred. Twenty-nine in all had run. The remainder were dead. The living fought on corpses, wading through the muck of blood and mud which had replaced the grassy green of the field. Beneath the squirrel's tree Pervides and Simeon were at last face to face. Breath was heavy in each of their lungs, and for a moment they considered each other. Their swords sprang to life and clashed together. The weary men danced in murderous steps, each man many times tantalizingly close to finishing his foe. Blow after blow fell, both with sword and fist, but neither would yield to fatigue. "Only the strong." Pervides remembered. "Only the strong overcome." It was a quote of Simeon's. Samson had said it was the code the count lived by. A man of strong will can do anything, he had told his son. A weak man, nothing.

Their eyes burned with exhaustion and desire. Here, thought both, is a man. I have created this man, the count realized in passing thought. Revenge. It breeds determination. For the first time in his life Simeon realized he might die. He fought harder. His blows struck thunderously at the young man. Pervides staggered, but never did he fall or lose position. He struck back. The battlefield was empty. The last few had fled. Everyone else was dead. Buzzards had begun to feast. They fought on. A songbird sang. Its voice was pure. The men paused as if to listen and looked into each other's eyes. There was respect in both faces. An animal respect intimated by strength and skill. They shared a half nod and charged each other. They stopped. Both blades had struck. Stumbling backwards, they fell upon their knees and looked at each other again. A repetition of the half nod, and Simeon fell on his back, Pervides' sword buried in his heart. Pervides removed Simeon's sword from his side and dropped it on the ground. He touched his wound and then fell likewise on his back. He drifted into unconsciousness listening to the bird. Overhead, the squirrel began to chuckle.

Chapter Twenty-four

Mirabel twisted the cloth above the bowl. Drops of blood rained into the water, spiraling about in beautiful swirls as they diffused into the whole. She dipped the cloth in the hot water again and dabbed the wound in the soldier's chest. He shifted when she touched him. He groaned. His eyes flickered. It was the most alive he had seemed in the two days he had been in the nunnery. The day before she thought he had died

a couple of times, but he held on. His eyes flung open, and he arched his back with a gasp. He was panting. Suddenly he grabbed Mirabel's hand and looked her in the eye. His eyes were intense, purposeful.

"Samson." He said painfully. "I need to speak with Samson."

She knew who it was. "Pervides?" She asked with wonder.

"How do you..." He slumped back on the bed, unconscious once again. His hand was limp in hers, and she gently set it across his chest.

Very deliberately she finished cleaning and redressing his wounds. As she returned from emptying the bloody water the mother superior met her in the hall.

"How is the young man?" She asked.

"Holding on."

"Still asleep then?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me know if he wakes. And Mirabel?"

"Yes."

"Is everything okay? You seem a bit different these past weeks. Come to think of it, since you took that child to the castle. Is there anything you would like to talk about?"

Mirabel looked at the floor momentarily and then back toward Mother Miriam. "Not right now mother, but I do have something to tell you."

"My ear is always open sister. Oh, by the way, Mirabel, your father is a baron is he not?"

"He is. Why?"

"Oh, I received a letter from him. It was a little surprising. I did not know."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing too much. He just wanted me to inform you that the count's son, well the count now, God bless Lord Simeon, was alive. He seemed to think you might want to know. But you already knew, didn't you my dear?"

"Yes."

"Well, like I said, if you need to talk, you know where to find me. And remember my dear, not everyone is meant to be a nun." She smiled and turned from Mirabel without waiting for a response. Mirabel's blush had been answer enough.

Mirabel stood there for a moment uncontrollably happy at the unexpected understanding of mother Miriam. Then she remembered Pervides and hurried from the hall. Moments later she was on the road to the castle. She walked quickly. Her mind was awash with memories. It had been four days since she saw Samson last. She smiled as she remembered their previous meeting. Samson led her by the arm into the enclosed courtyard at the rear of the manor. Quite a pair they must have made. He in an exquisite burgundy tunic lined with gold at the arms and collar. She in her nun's dress, shabby from months of continuous wear. A table had been set beneath the giant oak which dominated one corner of the yard. On the table a roasted pheasant, sweet cakes and fresh apples, sliced and laid out around a block of cheese. Two servants seated the couple across from each other. It was cool in the shade, and from the far side of the tree came the sound of musicians. They played a gentle tune which melded with the breeze. Once seated, the servants filled their goblets with wine and retired near the musicians to await any need which might arise.

"To you." Samson said, raising his glass.

"Thank you." She answered and drank. "It is beautiful." She swept her hand to cover everything.

"You make it more so." She laughed lightly and blushed the slightest bit. She was the happiest when she was with him. "Are you happy?" He asked.

"Now? Yes."

"But not all the time?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I do not want to be a nun anymore."

"You would choose me over God?"

"Who said it has anything to do with you?" She took a piece of pheasant. It fell apart the moment it touched her tongue. "But, yes."

"Will you marry me?" The words sprang from his lips with passion.

"Yes." She did not hesitate. Never had a word felt so natural upon her lips. A joyful tear crept from her left eye and began to descend her cheek. He reached across and with a fingertip wiped it away. She could not speak. Her face was locked in a graceful smile which she would for the rest of her life carry with her. The music played on, and it was perfect.

"I will go to your father tomorrow." Samson had said after a few minutes passed. He spoke gently, and in his face was a reflection of the happy glow spread across her own. A light wisp of wind stirred his hair. His face was full, almost to the healthy extent he bore before the travails at sea. He took her hand and softly caressed her palm. They spoke very little the remainder of the day, and she drifted off to sleep that night with marvelous dreams of her wedding feast.

The next day she awoke, and her room was different. It seemed already a bit of the past. Everything was bathed in new light, and she floated through the morning chores as happily as if she was strolling through a fair. She had changed the past weeks since she reunited with Samson, but now she simply glowed. The other nuns could not help but notice, and a majority understood. They too had been young. That passion would die with age. Only love for God would remain. So some thought. Others were afflicted with jealousy. Why she and not they? The life of the cloth was precious, but to just once feel like she felt; to know whatever she knew. Mirabel knew nothing of what the others perceived, only her own joy. When Louis appeared at the nunnery soon after the noon hour, she greeted him with cheer.

"Why Louis, such a pleasant surprise." Her voice danced with life. "How are you getting along at the count's?"

"Very well, thank you." He answered softly. He had filled out in the weeks since she took him to Samson, though he was still quite thin.

"Good. I am glad. And how well you are looking. You scarcely seem the same person. They feed you well?"

"Yes." His face was solemn. "I bring a message from Lord Samson." Mirabel's eyes lit up and the frivolity of her countenance grew intent on what the boy was about to say. "He has been locked in his chambers by his father and cannot fulfill the errand he promised you he would undertake today."

Her eyes softened with disappointment. Then, worriedly, she asked, "Is he okay? How? Why did his father arrest him?"

"He is fine, though he is saddened he cannot carried out his intended business. That is all he was able to tell me, but I heard he was locked up because his friend, the one that was on the island with him, has brought an army to fight the count. I heard a couple advisors talking about it. They thought Lord Samson was behind the whole thing. Back stabber, they called him. I wanted to hit them."

"It will be okay Louis." Mirabel's words were not convincing. "An army?" Her voice drifted off. "Hmm. Well, there is nothing for us to do about it. Would you like something to eat, Louis, before you return? You can tell me what your new life is like."

"Lord Samson told me to come right back to tell him what you said. Is there anything you want to say to him?"

"Yes. Tell him. No, let me write it down. Come with me. It will take just a moment." They walked to her room, and she took a fresh piece of paper from a box she kept under her bed. She scribbled a short note, folded it and handed it to Louis. "Let no one else see it." She said and then smiled. "It is good to see you again Louis. Thank you for delivering your message."

"I am glad I saw you too."

"Now go."

Louis made a half bow and left the room. When he was half way between the town and the manor he unfolded the note to look at the words. They meant nothing to him, though a few of the characters looked familiar. Samson was teaching him to read. "I love you." It said.

In response Mirabel received a ruby ring Samson's mother had often worn. A gold chain accompanied it, and after she had placed it about her neck, she kissed Louis on the cheek. She began to weep. The boy sat beside her and asked what the matter was.

"I don't know." Mirabel said, trying to smile. "Everything is just happening so fast. I... oh, it is not like me." She wiped her eyes. "Now, tell me what is happening. You said an army is near."

"Four hundred men." Louis answered informatively. "Lord Simeon has been preparing his forces all day. They plan to march out tomorrow to meet them. There is going to be a battle."

"And is it really his friend that leads them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Lord Samson told me his cause is just."

"Yes, he told me the same."

"Mirabel?"

"Yes Louis?"

"Is Lord Samson going to be okay?"

"Yes, I am sure he is. His father won't lock him up forever."

"I hope so. He is really nice. A lot of people there are mean. Only Lord Samson, and Paulus, are nice to me. Are you going to marry him?"

"What?"

"Lord Samson. Are you going to marry him?"

"Yes." Mirabel's face widened in a smile. It felt good to tell someone.

"I am glad. Are you going to come live in the castle then? That would be neat."

"I'm sure, eventually, but Louis, you cannot tell anyone we are engaged, okay?"

"Okay. Why?"

"It is still a secret. Just for a little while. Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Not a word."

"Even to Lord Samson?"

"Not even to him, unless he tells you first."

"Okay, but I am still glad you're going to marry him."

"Yes, so am I."

Mirabel slept fitfully that night, and she still lay in bed when the faint and frightful sounds of battle reached her ears. The entire day the town was filled with a quiet apprehension overshadowed by the distinct sounds of men killing and dying. People would pause in the streets and simply listen for awhile. Screams played in the background while the sisters silently conducted their daily prayers. No one mentioned it, but eyes would shift toward the field, most often with sadness, sometimes with curiosity or wonder. "A ghastly business." The mother superior called it.

"God is with Lord Simeon." Said Mary.

"How do you know?" Mirabel asked.

"He is in the right."

"How do you know?"

"Do not ask so many questions Mirabel." Mary turned from her.

She waited all day for Louis to bring word of Samson, but he had not arrived by the time the battle sounds had died and the sisters walked as one to the battleground. What she saw there made her forget everything else. Who knew men were capable of such things? She thought of the boy hanging from the tree. He laughed and with open hands welcomed the scores of corpses to the afterlife. The smell of blood made her gag. What on earth had these men sought out of life to have it end like this? Did they have wives? Children? Her feet were wet with blood. Who would bury all these, she thought. She gazed over the entire field. It made her feel small. There were so many, cast about as if they had fallen from the sky. So many. She went to work.

Walking to the manor Mirabel remembered the carnage and how heavy each corpse was to turn over so its face might be looking up when the priest paused at the body's side. The skin was cold and had ceased to feel alive. These were men no longer, merely cold, empty shells. She said a prayer for them.

"Everyone out!" Samson ordered when Mirabel was announced. As she approached a flock of servants and advisors made haste to vanish. They were silent until everyone left but drew near. Samson knelt before Mirabel. He placed his arms around her waist and sighed. She touched his head with her hand and looked down. "These miserable men." He said. "They were the first to whisper in my father's ear that I was behind all this, yet now he is gone they bow before me and attempt to whisper in my ear what good fortune it is that he

died so young. I truly do not like them.” He looked up at Mirabel. “But let us not speak of such things. I have missed you my dear.” She smiled but did not speak. “I shall go to your father tomorrow. Though I said that once before, there is no one now to lock me up.” He smiled half heartedly.

“Pervides is alive.” She said quietly. Her voice was even.

“Where?” His eyes lit up. He stood and held her elbows awaiting her answer with eagerness.

“The nunnery. His first words were to ask for you.”

“Then I shall go to him. At once. Is he badly hurt?”

“Yes, but I believe he shall pull through. He has been unconscious most of the time.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Not that I am aware.”

“Thank you, Mirabel, for this. Tell me, how should I treat the man who caused my father’s death?”

“After all he has done for you?”

“Yes.”

“And all you say your father did to him?”

“Yes.”

“I cannot tell you, but I will say this. If I am to be your wife, and if you choose to forgive him, he will always be welcome in my home and I shall kiss him like a brother and thank him for bringing you back to me. If you do not forgive him, I shall be thankful still, though I may never have the chance to tell him so.”

“Some will want him hanged.”

“And you will do as they wish?”

“I will do as I deem correct after I speak to him. It is what he would have me do.”

“Let us go then.” They left the room and made their way to the stables. Mirabel mounted Dionysus, who whinnied in approval of his new rider. While Samson was gone, he had bucked anyone who tried to mount him, and only Paulus could touch him without receiving a brusque snort of displeasure. Samson rode one of his father’s horses.

At the nunnery Mirabel led Samson to the room where Pervides lay. Mary was with him, and she was startled by Samson’s presence.

“Thank you sister,” he said to Mirabel, “for showing me the way.” They shared a short glance of affection before, to both nuns, he said, “if you will excuse me, I would like to be alone with this man.”

“Of course, my lord,” Mary answered, “but may I remind you this is a house of God. You must wait until he is well to deal with him.”

“And what is it, sister, you expect of me? To strangle a wounded man in his bed? Who do you expect him to be that I would so readily harm him?”

“With due respect, my lord, he is the man who killed your father, God rest his soul.”

“How do you know?”

“He said so himself just a few minutes ago. ‘It is done.’ He said. ‘Simeon by my hand is dead. You have been avenged.’ I do not think he was talking to me. It seemed like a dream.”

“Thank you sister. Now, please, will you excuse me?”

“Of course, my lord, but he said one other thing. It concerned you.”

“Yes?”

“He said, ‘Samson, my life is in your hands.’ I think he meant you, my lord.”

Mary bowed and left. Mirabel stood in the doorway a moment and watched Samson approach Pervides. His face was overwrought with worry, and as he sat at his bedside, she closed the door, leaving the two men alone.

“Your life in my hands?” Samson said out loud. He reached out and touched Pervides face. It was cold, almost as if he was dead. The bandage at his side was stained blood red. “You, who honor your freedom above all things, relinquish your life to me? Tell me friend, what do you expect? Are you aware that I have no choice? You have killed my father. Tradition dictates that I shall kill you, though I love you more than I have my own father. Though my father did worse to you than any man should ever have to bear. Though I owe you my life. I should kill you, they say, out of justice. Is it not justice you sought? Is it justice to kill a good man because he has destroyed a despicable one? No, of course not. My father was a fiend. But still, he was my father. He taught me to ride. When I was little he would set me on his knee and tell me glorious fables of lion pawed

eagles and three headed serpents. He would chase me around the room on rainy days and howl like a dog while I pretended to be a fawn. I remember he once carried me on his shoulders, and I felt like I was a king. But I remember also the way he beat his dogs and kicked them when he was mad at other things. I found an injured sparrow once, and when I took it to him so he could show me how to save it he picked it up by the tip of its wing and flung it to his dogs. I still remember the terrible squeak the bird let out as it twirled through the air. The dogs tore it to pieces, and I cried. He laughed at my tears and told me men do not cry. Men do not cry. And now, as a man, I have learned he treated people like he did that bird, and father, I do not cry for your death." He was silent for a moment.

"Pervides. I asked you once to come with me and to help build a better world, at least in the small corner we can control. I ask you again. Come with me. Everyone else be damned."

A rustling sound came from the bed, and weakly Pervides' arm extended toward Samson. Samson took his hand and felt a faint squeeze of affirmation.

"Do you forgive me?" Pervides spoke with effort.

"For what?"

"Do you forgive me?" He repeated. His eyes had not opened.

"Yes, I forgive you."

"You are a better man than I." The last word died into the soft breath of sleep. Pervides' chest rose and fell slowly, rhythmically. Samson was crying.

Chapter Twenty-five

The morning found Samson still at Pervides' side. Mirabel had covered him with a blanket after he fell asleep. She slept in a second chair at the end of the bed. Of the three, Pervides was the first to awake. In the dim light he looked at the sleeping forms. Samson slept with his feet outstretched beneath the bed. His face, even in sleep, was troubled. Mirabel's was childlike. He was captivated and wondered how such a pretty girl had become a nun. He began to think things he had not allowed himself to think of for a very long time. Of a wife and family. A farm. That is what he needed. Someone like her, with a kind face.

"Careful where you stare." Samson whispered. Pervides turned to him. Samson was smiling, though his eye had a serious look. "With her father's permission, she will be my wife."

Pervides glanced at Mirabel and then smiled. "Congratulations." He said softly.

"How are you this morning?"

"Sore. How long have I been here?"

"This is the third morning since the battle."

"I killed him, you know; your father."

"Yes. We went through that last night."

"Oh, yes. Did I tell you he did this to me?" He motioned to his wound with his chin.

"No."

"A strong man, your father. It would have been fair if I died too. All those men died because of me."

"Do I hear a hint of regret?"

"I have just realized, while gazing at your sleeping beauty, that I have been consumed by revenge. It has been the focus of my life for so long, I fear I have forgotten to simply live. Last night you said you forgive me. Why could I not forgive your father?"

"Heavy thoughts for a morning conversation."

"I have nearly died. It makes a man think."

Mirabel yawned and stretched as she awakened. She smiled sleepily at the two men.

"Good morning darling." Samson said, rising to his feet. He held his hand out to her and helped her to her feet. "May I introduce my dear friend, Pervides." He led her to the bed. "Pervides, it is my pleasure to introduce Mirabel, daughter of the Baron of Dunvetus and, if I am to be so lucky, at day's end, my betrothed."

"A pleasure." Pervides bowed his head. Mirabel loosed her hand from Samson, bent over the bed and kissed Pervides on the cheek.

"Thank you for bringing Samson home alive. I shall forever be in your debt."

"Had I known you awaited him, I would have brought him home sooner."

They laughed. The door opened, and Mary entered.

"Pardon, my lord, but the Baron of ---- requested that I inform you he is waiting outside to speak with you on urgent business."

"Oh, Duncan; how eagerly he seeks to wrap his lips around my ear. Thank you sister. Please tell the baron I will be with him shortly." Mary left. "He is a prickly one, that Duncan. He will want you dead, my friend, little doubt about it."

"Let him wish it."

"That is fine to say, but until you are well enough to watch your own back, I give you my word that I will keep you safe."

"Thank you."

"Mirabel." Samson turned from Pervides and took her hands. His words floundered when he looked at her. "To your father's."

"Yes."

"Keep an eye on my friend." They kissed, parted a few feet and then reunited to kiss again. "Goodbye my love." He said while letting her hands fall. "Pervides." He turned to the door and left the wounded man and his future bride behind. Mirabel made her way to the bedside chair and sat down.

When Samson reached the road Duncan was waiting with two of his advisors.

"My lord." Duncan bowed after he dismissed his men out of hearing range.

"What is it Duncan?"

"There has been talk my lord. It is not well for you to disappear so suddenly."

"I will do as I please."

"As you may, my lord, but there is much you must do. You are responsible for a great deal now. A lot of people depend on you. They need to see you at a time like this. Your presence helps dull the grief." Samson looked at him dully and did not answer. "And well, people are talking, my lord, about who you have been visiting in the nunnery."

"That is my business."

"Yes, but well, people would not look fondly on you if they knew you were visiting that Pervides fellow, unless, of course, it was to arrest him for the murder of your father."

"How do you know that?"

"It is no secret, my lord. He is the only wounded man to survive the battle. I have even heard that he not only started the battle but he was the one who, forgive me, killed your father, God rest his soul."

"Enough." Samson looked intently at Duncan. "I have a very important errand to attend to. I will return this evening. Pervides is not to be harmed. Do you understand? He is to be left alone."

"Yes, my lord. I will see to it myself." He bowed. Samson considered him for a moment and then shook his head negatively. He walked to the stable and saddled Dionysus.

"Things must change." He said to his horse as he petted the creature's face. "Are you ready for a ride boy?"

It was twenty miles to the Dunvetus estate, and for a time Samson was able to forget everything else and simply ride. When he reached the mines of Qoh he grew saddened. He thought of the town his friend had lived in and of his visits to the place. A memory struck him suddenly. He saw himself digging the fire pit after he killed his deer. Beside him a child chipped at the ground. It was a familiar child. Why had he not realized it before? It was Louis. It all made sense now. The fire; everything Mirabel had told him about the boy. What debt did he owe the child?"

"Good day my lord." A passing worker saluted.

"Good morning."

"If you are headed north, beware the road. There was a bit of a washout the other week."

"Thank you. How far along?"

"Oh, a mile or two. Not far. It is passable. Just don't go along too fast."

"I won't. Thank you."

"Good day my lord."

"Good day." Samson prodded Dionysus, and they trotted out of sight of Qoh. The washout came and went. His thoughts turned to the task at hand. Mirabel's father was a just man, though as a friend of his father he might refuse to speak of marriage while yet Simeon had been put to rest. He thought of Mirabel. She made him happy more than ever in his life, and to think, she would be with him all the time. His thoughts flashed back to the island. He had built her up in his dreams during those months; a woman he had met only once. Yet the reality of who she was exceeded every dream. The hours on the road passed away. His thoughts were light. He wondered if they would have a son. What would they name him? A wonderful boy to teach to ride and hunt. To laugh with and chase. He would find a puppy like Diadem, and the two could grow together. Or a girl. He would hold her on his knee and tell stories or walk with her in the woods looking for rabbits and dragons. A little child, beautiful like her mother, to hold tight and feel loved. It would be easy to forget everything else in a world like that. Let someone else take responsibility for his lands and wile away the remaining years in play, watching his children grow, smiling, always smiling, as they became adults and he and Mirabel grew old. The future. It stared at him.

"I am grieved to hear of your father's death." The Baron of Dunvetus said as he approached Samson. They were in the great hall of the Dunvetus estate. The baron placed his hand on Samson's shoulder. It was heavy with the weight of age. He had begun to lose his hair. "If there is anything I may do for you, I am at your service."

"Thank you."

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"Two reasons. You were one of my father's oldest friends. He would have wanted me to tell you in person, but I see you have already heard."

"Yes. Such news travels quickly. I just wish I had been able to join him in battle. Tell me, did you not fight? I heard very few men survived."

"Few did. There was only one wounded man. The rest either fled or died. A vast majority are dead."

"A tough fight. It is a rare thing."

"Yes. You should know, the man who led the opposing army; he was my friend. In no way could I have fought against him."

"Well, war is a peculiar thing."

"Please, I do not want to give the wrong impression. You know, no doubt, that I was believed dead for quite some time."

"Yes. We rejoiced when he heard you had returned."

"I am only alive because of the man who killed my father."

"I see."

"There is more. I need to tell someone. Had I been forced to make a choice, I would have fought with him." The baron was silent. His face showed he was attempting to digest the words.

"Against your father?" He said after a few moments.

"Yes. No, not against my father as my father but against the man who slaughtered an entire village of people. Do you remember the village of Qoh? Surely you passed through on the way to our home."

"Yes. It was a beautiful place." His voice was remembering.

"Do you remember what happened to it?"

"Yes." The word was definitive. It unburdened a secret.

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"Were you there?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"We slaughtered them, as you said." He was trembling, and reaching backward, he found a bench to rest upon. "The memories of that night have haunted me these many years. Sometimes I awake in the early morning with tears in my eyes. My servants have said they have heard me screaming in my sleep. 'No!' I scream. 'Not the children.' These are the words I did not utter that night. It is such a simple word." He was silent.

"Tell me, did my father kill anyone with his own hand?"

"Dozens. He was a madman that night. I had never seen him like that. Not in all our battles."

"Did you?"

"One. He was an old man too. A man I knew. Louis was his name. A gentle old man I had spoken with many times on my way through. He fought back. They all tried to, but we slaughtered them. I shall never forget his face when I struck him. He recognized me. His eyes said 'for shame, for shame.' It was as if I could hear the words in my mind. I rode away then, into the woods." The baron's eyes were wet with sorrow. He stared at the ground.

"I met this man." Samson said off handedly. He sat beside the baron.

"Is it true," the baron said after the two sat silently a few minutes, each lost in his own thoughts, "that the leader of the army, your friend..."

"Pervides."

"Pervides?"

"Yes, that is his name."

"I met a child of that name, years ago. Your Pervides; he was from Qoh?"

"Yes."

"It must be him then."

"You know him?"

"Only briefly. He was Louis' eldest grandson." A connection flashed in Samson's mind, and he knew. "I remember now, he was in exile. Something to do with your father's men. Poaching I think."

"A deer?"

"Yes that was it. Amazing. Where did he get an army?" His voice drifted off. "I should have been on that field." He continued dolefully. "I should be dead with all the rest." He paused. "I should have liked to meet that Pervides."

"You can."

The baron looked at Samson. "He is the one?"

"Yes. He is with your daughter now."

"Mirabel?"

"Yes, she is playing the part of nurse."

"You have seen her then?"

"Yes. Shall we speak of happier things?"

"Yes, and yes, if your next question is the one I read in your eyes."

"It is. May I have your daughter's hand?"

A wide smile spread across the baron's face, and his eyes again grew moist. "Certainly, though you should ask the mother superior as much as me. You asked Mirabel, right?"

"Yes."

"Splendid. She said yes, of course."

"Of course." Both men were smiling uncontrollably.

"Oh, wait here. I must get Isabella." He stood and ran lightly to the door at the end of the hall. He called to a servant. "Go fetch the baroness Armand. Quickly now; it is of the utmost importance." He sauntered over to Samson, grinning like a dog. The men sat silently until the baroness entered. They stood. "Ah, my dear, what took you so long?" The baroness ignored him and addressed Samson.

"Welcome my lord to our humble home. I am grieved to hear of your father's death."

"Thank you baroness. It is a pleasure to see you again." He kissed her hand.

"Thank you my lord." She looked at him with a motherly look and was taken aback by the happiness behind his eyes.

"If I may?" The baron inquired of Samson.

"Certainly."

"My dear," he could hardly contain his grin, "the count has asked for permission to marry our daughter." He said these words as nonchalantly as he could manage. The baroness blinked her eyes and twitched her lips a little. She lost color in her face and for a moment seemed ready to faint.

"Your excellency," she said sedately after a moment, "honors us." The baron burst out laughing. He hugged his wife, and she smiled widely. "Wonderful." She added. "Absolutely wonderful."

Chapter Twenty-six

After Samson left the room, Mirabel occupied his seat at the bedside of Pervides.

"He is a good man." Pervides said to her.

"Yes? He says the same of you."

"Still?"

"Yes."

"And you; what do you think of what I have done?"

"It is ghastly but just. Though, I must admit, I hope there is never a battle such as that again. It was terrible."

"You were there?"

"In the aftermath. I found you."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

They were looking at one another. The silence grew awkward, and then it changed. Pervides sighed and Mirabel leaned back in her chair.

"It was never meant to be like this." Pervides said dejectedly.

"What?"

"My life. Did you ever dream as a child what your life would be like when you were an adult?"

"Yes, of course."

"Has it turned out like you thought?"

"A few things, yes, but mostly no. I never dreamed I would be a nun. But I did hope to fall in love. What about you; what did you dream?"

"Of a simple life. I guess I never expected anything different than the life of my father or my grandfather. It's funny. I just remembered a saying my father used to say all the time. 'All I want,' he would say, 'is to be free to be my own man, to bury my hands in my own soil and to love and be loved.' If only..."

"What did you say?" Mirabel interrupted. She straightened upright in the chair.

"What?"

"Your father's saying. Could you say it once more?"

"All I want is to be free to be my own man, to bury my hands in my own soil..."

"And to love and be loved." She finished. "Tell me, Pervides, do you have a younger brother?"

"I had three."

"How old would they be now?" Pervides had raised himself in bed, intrigued by the eagerness with which Mirabel asked her questions. She was leaning closer to him with every word.

"Claudius would have been eighteen, Sal would have been, oh, fifteen or sixteen and Louis..."

"Louis?" Mirabel nearly leapt out of her chair.

"Yes." Pervides looked at her with astonishment.

"How old?"

"Oh, I don't know. He was quite little the last time I saw him."

"How old?" She clutched her hands together and towered over him in anticipation.

"Nine, maybe ten."

A short squeal escaped Mirabel's lips, and she grasped Pervides' forearm with her hands, which she shook with excitement. She was ecstatic, and a bewildered Pervides smiled out of sheer wonder.

"What? Why?" He was searching for the right words. She held her forefinger to his lips.

"Just wait here. I don't want to get your hopes up, but... Oh, just wait. I will be back as soon as I can. Can it be?" She rushed out of the room muttering to herself. "Can it be? Can it be?" Pervides watched her leave with astonishment but also hope. In what he did not know.

Mirabel ran to the stables. There were no horses, but in the corner the gardener's old mule munched on a bale of hay. She placed a blanket on his back, a rope around his neck and led him into the open before mounting. She nudged his ribs with her feet, and they trotted off toward the castle at his steady pace.

Gradually they approached the castle gate. Four horsemen and a wagon passed through the opening towards her, and she moved to the side of the road momentarily. The back of the cart was filled with rope and blankets. The man driving it wore a yellow cloak.

The mule found a patch of grass at the side of the road and decided it wanted to eat. Mirabel tugged at the rope a couple of times. He did not budge so she jumped to the ground and ran through the gate. When she reached the manor doors the guards bowed.

"Good morning my lady." One of them addressed her. She had begun to become accustomed to the title over the past few weeks. Samson had made sure the guards knew who she was. "I am afraid the count is not at home."

"Yes, I am aware, but I have come for his page... oh, Paulus!" She called as he emerged from the door to the left of the main doors. "Do you know where Louis is?"

"No my lady. We can check his room first, but I believe I heard him get up some hours ago. His room is next to mine." They entered the building, and after a half dozen turns and hallways, Paulus stopped and knocked at a door. No answer. He opened the door and looked inside. The bed was a tussle of blankets, and in the light from a narrow window Mirabel saw a roll of paper covered with Louis' infant attempts at learning to write. This was atop a small table beside which sat a stool. The room made Mirabel smile. She could imagine Louis there, scribbling at his letters while glancing out his narrow window. It was a tiny room, but to him, no doubt, it was a refuge. "There are a couple of other places we can look," Paulus said as he closed the door, "but it may take awhile. If you wish, my lady, you can wait in Lord Samson's study and when I find Louis I will bring him to you."

"Thank you, no. It is important I find him. Lead on Paulus."

"As you wish my lady. This way."

"Tell me Paulus," she said as they walked, "are you also so formal with Samson?"

"I never forget who he is, but we have known each other a very long time, my lady. In private, of course, we are less formal."

"He told me about your brother. I am very sorry."

"Thank you. Lord Samson loved Marcus very much. Growing up I always felt like I had two older brothers. Well, he is not here either. Sometimes I find Louis sitting at this window just watching the people moving around in the yard below. He also lingers around the kitchen at times. That boy eats more than you can believe. The cook likes him too. He has even made pastries especially for Louis a few times."

"Is Louis getting along well?"

"I think so, though a lot of people treat him badly. They are jealous. Lord Samson has taken quite a liking to him. I like him, though. He has a kind heart. Oh, here we are."

"Mirabel!" Louis met them on the stairs to the first floor, where the kitchen was located. He had a slice of buttered bread in his hand. A few bites were missing. He ran forward and hugged her.

"Oh Louis, I have quite the surprise for you." She said. "But you must come back with me to the nunnery."

"Is it okay Paulus?" Louis asked with a pleading voice.

"Don't ask me Louis. You're on your own time now."

"Thank you for your help Paulus." Mirabel smiled.

"My pleasure, my lady. May I see you to the door? I was on my way out as I recall."

"Yes you were. I am sorry if I have kept you from anything."

"No, no. I was headed out to the stable. I have some errands to run for Lord Samson. After you my lady." He said when they reached the door. Mirabel's mule was being held by one of the guards.

"Oh, thank you." Mirabel said as she took the rope from the soldier.

"Would you like a horse instead, my lady?" Paulus asked as she helped Louis onto the mule's back. "We have plenty to spare."

"No, no. This old fellow suits me. Thank you." Paulus offered his knee to serve as a stool to help her mount the mule. "Goodbye Paulus."

"Goodbye my lady."

"Bye Paulus." Louis waved. Paulus waved in return and followed the mule with his eyes a few seconds before turning to resume his business.

"So, what is the surprise?" Louis asked as they rode toward the village.

"I can't tell you. It's a surprise."

"Come on, just a hint."

"Well, okay. There is someone I want you to meet. That is all I am going to say."

"Who?"

"I'm not going to say."

"Please."

"No. Listen." They passed a peasant on the road. He was singing. His voice was a deep.

"What is he saying?" Louis asked when they could no longer hear him.

"I don't know. But I thought it was beautiful."

"So did I. He looked happy."

"Yes." They had reached the stables.

"Thanks for the ride." Louis said, patting the mule on his muzzle after they had taken him back to his corner. After a drink from his water bucket he returned to his bale of hay.

Louis took Mirabel's hand as they entered the nunnery. She led him down the hall with the identical doors, beyond her room where he was used to stopping, to the end, where the baths were. They entered the opposite door. Louis' hand trembled with anticipation while Mirabel turned the latch. They stepped into the room. Mirabel stopped. She squeezed Louis' hand tightly and then let go.

"Stay here." She said quickly as she darted into the hall. Louis stood still in wonderment. The room was empty.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Samson's face turned white when she told him.

"Samson's men took him." Mary had told Mirabel after they had nearly collided in the hall.

"And you let them?"

"Yes, of course."

"No! Where did they take him?"

"How should I know?"

Mirabel had started to cry uncontrollably. She lowered herself to the floor, leaning against the wall. She buried her face in her hands. "Why?" She muttered. Louis' soft footsteps approached. She felt his hand on her shoulder.

"What is wrong Mirabel?" He asked.

"They took him." She said, wiping her eyes.

"Who?"

"Your brother. That was your surprise Louis. Pervides is your brother."

"I knew it." Samson said with wonder when she told him. "I just figured it out myself." This was when she told him Pervides was gone. He was silent in his rage for a moment.

"Mirabel, I love you." He said softly.

"As I you."

"Your father has given his grace."

"Oh," was the only response she gave. She had nearly forgotten why he had been gone.

"I must go after him." He took her hands. "Go to your father's. Take Louis with you. I will be back as soon as I can."

"Do you think he is still alive?"

"It would be best if he is." His voice was flat, beyond anger. There was a knock at the door. "What?" Samson called loudly.

"Permission to enter my lord." Duncan answered.

"Yes."

"Welcome back my lord." Duncan hesitated when he saw Mirabel. "My lady."

"Where is he?" Samson let Mirabel's hand fall and approached Duncan.

"Who?" Samson's fist caught Duncan by complete surprise. He fell on his back, a large red mark on his left cheek.

"Where is he?"

"Wh..."

"Do not say you do not know."

"Honestly, your excellency, I had nothing to do with it." Samson took a step toward Duncan. "But I have heard he was being taken to a slave trader."

"Where?"

"I have heard to the east. Near Venice."

"Who has taken him?"

"I am not at liberty to say, my lord."

"Enough. Guards!" The doors opened and two soldiers entered. "Take the baron to the dungeon. See he is given a small cell."

"It was the correct thing to be done." Duncan said with conviction. "He killed your father. He should be hung."

Samson glared at Duncan. "Get him out of my sight." When they were gone he turned to Mirabel. "I must leave immediately to have any hope." He lowered his head. "I am sorry Mirabel."

"For what? This is not of your doing. Go. Find your friend. I can wait." He kissed her and they remained a time gazing at each other in silence. "Go." She said at last, attempting to hide the gathering tears behind a smile. He kissed her once more and left the room, glancing only briefly back as he passed through the doorway.

Samson met Paulus at his room. Louis and Diadem were there too, lying on Paulus' bed, staring at the ceiling.

"Ready horses for the two of us Paulus." Samson ordered. "Also a pack horse. Pack light but take enough money to last awhile. Enough food for a week, at least."

"Yes my lord. To where do we ride?"

"After Pervides."

"I want to go." Louis said, sitting up in bed.

"I am sorry Louis, but no."

"But he is my brother."

"Yes, and he is my friend and I want to see him again, just like you. Paulus and I will have a better chance by ourselves. Okay?"

"Okay." Louis said mournfully.

"Besides, I want you to go with Mirabel to her father's. Something is happening here. I am not entirely sure what, but she may be in danger. I want you to keep her company. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"And will you look after Diadem as well. She likes you."

"I like her too."

"Good. Mirabel is in my study. Go, help her get ready to leave."

Louis slowly rose from the bed. "Say hello to my brother for me when you find him."

"I will, now go."

"I will meet you in the stables Paulus."

"Yes sir."

Samson threw himself on the bed beside Diadem. She yawned and stretched her back against his side. He turned his face to look at her, and she licked his cheek. "Well old friend." Samson sighed. Diadem whined and nuzzled against his shoulder. He sat up on his side and rubbed her stomach. "Goodbye girl." He said after a moment. When he stood, she followed him. "Stay Diadem." She whined. "Not this time." He tussled her ears before closing the door. He could hear her whining inside. He wanted nothing more than to let her out, to forget everything else and go for a walk in the woods. That would help nothing. He walked to his brother's room. He found Lucius with two of Duncan's associates. They bowed respectfully and left when Samson entered.

"You have put Duncan in the dungeon?" Lucius said without greeting.

"Yes."

"What on earth for?"

"Did they not tell you?"

"They said you are trying to protect that friend of yours; the one who killed father."

"Yes. And now I am going after him. Until I return, you are in charge. Try not to ruin everything. I have nothing else to say." He turned and left his brother with his mouth open.

"You have changed Samson." He managed as Samson left. He said something else, but his older brother did not hear.

Samson arrived at the stables before Paulus and saddled Dionysus. He had started on Paulus' horse when the squire arrived with the saddle bags for the pack horse. In a few minutes they were riding out the gates. Samson felt many eyes upon his back, some set with love, others wariness, yet more with spite. Turning, he caught only Mirabel at the window on the third floor, across the hall from his study. She waved, and he held his hand in salute. Once out of the gates, they spurred their horses and set off at a gallop. The dust had scarcely settled before Lucius ordered Duncan released from the dungeon.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Louis sat in his window gazing blankly over the courtyard, waiting for Mirabel to return from the nunnery. He was worried. For Samson and Paulus. For Mirabel and himself. For his brother. For Diadem. She had blown past him when he opened the door to Paulus' room. The last he saw her she was leaving the castle gate running full tilt in pursuit of her master. There were voices in the corridor, and as they approached, he recognized Duncan's voice.

"Trust me, you will be well rewarded for this my friend." He walked into view with one other man. Duncan was facing Louis but could not see him as the window sat back in the wall. The second man was short and wore a yellow cloak. "The count must not come home, do you understand?"

"Do you want him dead?" The voice sent a chill through Louis' entire body. He tried to become so flat as to become part of the wall. It was William.

"No, I can't be part to murder of a count."

"Only abduction, eh?"

"He just needs to disappear for a few years, long enough for his brother to take legitimate control of things."

"By which you mean, for you to take control."

"Yes, of course, but." He paused. "We should not talk about such things here. You know what you have to do."

"Yes, yes." William chuckled. The sound flooded Louis' mind with memories. He dreaded the moment he would turn around. From where he stood he would see Louis. He held his breath and prepared to leap from the window, but the two men left the way they had come. Louis was shivering with fright.

He remained there quite some time; until he heard Mirabel's voice in the courtyard. He rushed from the window, running without pause until his arms were around her waist.

"What's this?" Mirabel said with astonishment.

"I. He." Louis panted. "William. Samson."

"What is it Louis? Take your time. Speak slowly."

"I heard Duncan talking to William."

"William? Oh. Oh, no. Did they see you?"

"No, but they are going to attack Lord Samson."

Mirabel did not answer immediately. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. William is to abduct him. Duncan told him too. And William laughed."

"We can do nothing." Mirabel's voice was empty. "Come, we must go to my father's. We are not safe here."

Mirabel helped Louis onto his horse. She was helped onto her own by Abner Vilni.

"My lady, are you sure the two of you will be okay? I gather you are leaving town."

"What makes you say that?"

"It is no secret you are dear to Lord Samson, and with him gone; well it makes sense. I fear this place may get a little tough for good people, especially those fond of the count."

"What have you heard?"

"Oh, nothing in particular, but the thing with the baron being locked up and then let go. It is all strange. Ever since the battle there has been a strange calm in the castle. Too many people sneaking around. It makes a man want to leave."

"Why don't you?"

"Me? Oh, I'll be fine. I know how to keep my mouth shut. No, I'll wait till the count returns. I think he will do good things for all of us. All this just has to settle itself out. Anyway, you should be getting off. Just be careful my lady. Take care of her Louis."

"Thank you Abner." Mirabel said, and they were off. They rode in silence, trotting along at a hastened pace until they reached the mining town of Qoh. Louis pulled his horse to a stop and stared at the series of ramshackle buildings he had known well in his days at the bordello. He thought of Camille. He thought of his life before then, in the old hollow tree, and lastly before the fire.

"I remember," he said, looking at Mirabel, "my mother's face."

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-nine

Darkness. A soft wind blew across the desert, carrying bits of sand into every crevice of the clay buildings and piling against the Bedouin tents at the edge of town. All was quiet save the distant sound of wagon wheels. Eventually three wagons appeared on the road from Damascus. They stopped in a line outside the largest building, a giant stone square which overwhelmed the village.

As the first hint of day lit the eastern sky a man emerged from the back of the lead cart and approached the building. He wore a white robe specked with brown. It fluttered around his legs as he stood knocking at the building's solitary door. A minute passed before he heard the turning of a key. The door swung inward with a creak, and a short man with sleepy eyes appeared.

"Oh, it's you." He rubbed his eyes. "Why so early? Don't you sleep?" He received no answer. "Well, come on in. Balthazar will want to see you."

The visitor followed the little man into a dark corridor. The doorman carried a lamp. They turned right at a "t" in the passageway. As they walked, to their right there was a door every fifteen feet, while to the left the wall was solid except for a small recess, six inches high by nine wide, every five feet. They paused at the third door. The small man knocked.

"What?" A voice called from within.

"Andujar has arrived sir."

The door opened after a few moments, and Balthazar bid Andujar to enter.

"It is good you have come." Balthazar said. "We have lost many this week."

"It has been warm lately."

"Yes."

"The price has increased."

"How much?"

"On average, twenty-three."

"How many?"

"Eleven."

"How are they?"

"They seem a good crop, but we shall see. You wear hard on your labor."

"It is unavoidable. We will raise our price as well."

"How much?"

"I will have to think on it. You can bring them in."

"I'll need a couple of men."

"They're at breakfast. Take as many as you need."

Twenty minutes passed before Andujar and three men armed with cudgels exited the building. They walked to the rear of the second wagon. As Andujar unlocked a small barred door the sound of moving chains came from within. Six men sat inside, bound together by iron shackles.

"Out you dogs!" Andujar ordered. He pulled at the first man, and the rest followed, each stepping gingerly to the ground before being pushed toward the guards.

"Line them up over here!" Balthazar called as he left the building. Two guards prodded the men toward him. "Well, what have we here? Asians. Andujar!"

"What?" Andujar called from behind the third wagon.

"What did you pay for the Asians?"

"What? I can't hear. Wait a minute." He rounded the wagons a moment later leading five men. The final guard walked behind them. "Now, what do you want?"

"The Asians. How much?"

"Twenty-one. There have been a lot of them lately."

"Where are they from?"

"Let's see. This one, I think, is Chinese. This one Indian. The third is Persian I believe. From the east. He's the only one that understands proper Arabic."

"And what have we here?"

"An Italian. Paid a goodly sum for him. He looks strong."

"He has a proud look to him though. We'll have to fix that. Let's see. Five; what are these?"

"Ethiopians, I think. They came as a bunch. A family I'm pretty sure."

"This one's pretty young isn't he?"

"Yes, but he looks strong."

"And the last two."

"He is a moor, and this fellow, I believe, is a Jew."

"Well, we need the bodies all right. Okay," he said loudly to the slaves, "this is a salt mine. If you want to live, if you want to eat, you will work hard. If you do not, you will die the most miserable of deaths." He looked at Andujar. "They don't have a clue what I am saying do they?"

"A couple."

"Well, they'll figure it out. Take them inside. Give them something to eat. We'll take them over with the rest. And keep an eye on this one."

"The Italian?"

"Yes. He's not scared. You notice that? Never buy a slave that's not afraid. Remember that Andujar. I told you before."

The line of men moved with a bleakness which cannot be described. Their chains clinked. Their feet shuffled. Eyes turned down, their thoughts were of homes hundreds or thousands of miles away. With loved ones. With familiar places. Of how they ended in this place at this time. They all thought to run. No one did. After days in the black box of the wagon they could form no concept of where they were. They were hungry, weak. They smelled. Led into the building they walked to the left. To their left were doors. To the right the same blank wall with the small slats. They turned right at the corner. An identical hall met them. It was dark, and at its end they again turned right. There were only two doors on the left of this wall, spaced symmetrically at thirds. On the inner wall, centered, there was a large iron door. They stopped. One of the guards opened the large door, and the first two prisoners were pushed inside. The door closed. A minute later it opened and the next two were taken inside. Another minute and Samson was pushed inside. He was chained to the Moor. Their shackles were removed, while two guards stood brandishing clubs, wary of any movement by the slaves. Samson shook his feet and raised his shoulders to stretch. A cudgel struck his back, and he stumbled. One of the guards said something in Arabic, and they laughed. A second door opened inward, and he was pushed from the dark entry into sunlight. He blinked his eyes. He was in an open yard. It was square, and along the outer wall, the same as the inner wall of the square corridor, were small partitions which formed open rooms of some five feet by five feet. Slaves sat in some fifteen of these partitions, mostly in solitude. A few sat together talking or observing the new arrivals. In the center of the yard was a small stone platform with a pit in the middle. Even from the doorway he could smell the stench of the common toilet. He was pushed from behind by the guard and walked further into the yard. The door closed. He turned around when it opened again. Two of the Ethiopians were pushed out. Samson walked to his left, appraising the prison. The door opened and the final three slaves exited. The door closed and was bolted.

The walls were at least ten feet high. Each side of the square had fifteen compartments. They had an overhanging ledge of three feet. It slanted upwards and would make scaling the walls impossible, though it provided some shade to the compartments. A bell sounded loudly, and the prisoners began to stir. They separated to individual partitions. A few moments after the bell the first of the small doors opened. A bowl was set in the recess and the prisoner grabbed it greedily. The new arrivals rushed to find their own places. Samson did not move. He turned in a circle and watched the spectacle of men acting like dogs, shoveling a mean looking gruel into their mouths with such haste they would be incapable of so much as a single breath between gulps. One man, however did not act the same. He took the dish, rose and walked to the center of the square. He sat on the raised stones surrounding the toilet and began leisurely to eat his meal. He looked at Samson, let his hand fall from his mouth and gasped. Samson too was struck mute. He ran to the man, whom stood to greet him in embrace.

"Samson; what on earth?" Pervides' eyes were wet with wonder. "Never mind just yet." He said as Samson began to speak. "Go to that last cell. You must eat. You will need the strength."

They walked together where Pervides pointed and silently waited until the door opened. Samson took the bowl. They walked back to the center of the square. Sitting beside each other they fingered the gruel into their mouths. It tasted rotten. When they finished Pervides led Samson to the large entry door. A small door had been opened beside it. They pushed the bowls through. They fell with a splash into a bucket on the far side of the wall.

"Are you okay?" Samson asked as they returned to their seats.

"Healthier every day."

"You look terrible."

"Yes? So do you. I nearly died when I first got here though."

"How long have you been here?"

"A few weeks. I was in Damascus for awhile. No one wanted to buy me when I was still bedridden. And you; you came after me?"

"Yes, the very next day."

"And since?"

"The road has been long my friend. We were ambushed outside Venice."

"We?"

"Paulus was with me. I was able to put up enough of a fight that he got away. After they took me I lost track of things. At first I tried to tell them I would pay well for my freedom, but they ignored me. I changed hands. I traveled. I don't know how long. On foot. In the back of wagons. It has been months. I've thought of trying to escape, but I don't know. I had a feeling that I would find you, somehow, this way. I had nearly given up, and here you are."

"Here we are." A time passed in silence.

"How is it?"

"Long days cutting and hauling blocks of salt. We are always chained in pairs and there are half a dozen guards armed with cudgels, daggers and bows. A little while ago two men made a run for it. They shot one dead and made the other drag him around the rest of the day while he worked."

"How many are they?"

"Ten, maybe. It is not a lot. The village is a few score."

"And we are what, thirty?"

"Yes, but it is impossible to communicate. There are people from all over the world."

"Is escape possible?"

"It must be." The bell rang twice, and the slaves headed to the door. They entered two by two to be shackled together. "Do not speak all day. It is for the best. Keep your eyes open. See if you see what I have seen. There may be a way, but it will be dangerous."

They attempted to enter the entry together, but the guards separated them. Samson was attached to an older man. He looked Greek and did not look anywhere but the ground. He coughed every fifteen to twenty seconds. His feet were bare. They were dry and cracked from the salt, and before the shackle was in place Samson could see a ring of bruises where the metal beat against his skin. They were shoved into the corridor and led with the others around the building and outside. After only a few hundred meters they entered the mine. A pile of tools were at the bottom of a ramp. The guards remained at the top and watched while the prisoners retrieved the picks, shovels and saws. They were gone by the time Samson and the old man reached the place. The old man motioned for Samson to follow, and they walked further into the pit to a pile of salt. The old man picked up a piece. Samson did likewise. The salt bit at his hands. The block, after days of listlessness, weighed on his shoulder. After only a few steps his breath was heavy. By the time they reached the top of the ramp he was sweating. They placed the blocks in one of the carts Andujar had returned with, turned and retraced their steps to the salt pile. The second time Samson watched the old man. His legs were shaking as he walked, while his entire back bent beneath the weight. After that Samson tried to take only the large pieces, leaving the smallest for his companion. He turned his mind to his surroundings. The only way out of the pit was up the ramp. At the top the guards watched over the slaves and would allow only four at a time out; one pair walking to the wagon, the second returning. During the course of the day there were always at least two guards watching. When the slaves ate and were given water there were usually four. Later in the day the guards changed. At the end, when the sun was already beginning to set, the second set of guards led the prisoners

back to their prison. They were fed dinner in the same manner as breakfast, and afterwards a majority of the slaves curled up in their partitions to sleep. Samson met Pervides where they had spoken in the morning. They sat on the ground and leaned against the stones. The air was soon filled with the sound of snoring.

"Ready to do this the rest of your life?" Pervides asked wearily.

"No."

"It's not so bad. We do not work on the Muslim Sabbath."

"Well, in that case."

"What do you think?"

"A direct attack is the only way. It would be best with four men, if we can arrange it. An hour before the guards change."

"Yes. It is dangerous, but we have no choice. And once away from the guards we must head here to the town. I am sure you noticed the horses were not near the carts. A man would be mad to attempt to escape on foot."

"I noticed. Is there anyone else we can rely on?"

"It is dangerous. Men receive extra food for exposing attempts. There is one, perhaps, who came with me. He tried himself on the journey in. Got beat up pretty bad. I will speak to him. You and he should never be seen together, just as I and the fourth should not be."

"That makes sense. How long before the wagons return?"

"A week. Two weeks. It varies."

"Until then?"

"Stay alive. Do exactly as they wish."

"Be the model slave?"

"Precisely."

"It is good to see you my friend. We shall talk in a few days. No reason to raise suspicions."

"Agreed. We will speak on the Sabbath."

"When..."

"In three days."

Chapter Thirty

Samson swept his hand in front of his face. Four flies darted into the air and began to circle his head. He set his hand down. One by one they returned. He could feel their footsteps as they crawled around his dry, cracking, skin. He waved again. For over two hours he had done nothing else but wave away the same four flies. He sat in his partition, his legs outspread before him in a "v". His back was against the wall. It was the Sabbath. He stared vacantly forward, seeing nothing. His body was numb. A gust of wind blew into the yard. Sand drove against his face. He closed his eyes until it passed. He yawned. A thought began and died. He swept at the flies. Another hour passed, slowly, empty. It feels good to rest, he thought. He looked at his hand and traced the cracks with his eyes. They had been stained white by the salt. If he put his finger in his mouth it tasted like salt. If he licked his lips he tasted salt. In the middle of the yard was a barrel of water. It was dirty, but it tasted good. He wanted some. He did not move. In a little while. I'll just sit here a little while longer. Another hour passed. The flies had gone. He scratched his head and looked at the water barrel. I should wake up, he thought, though he was awake. He swept his hand in front of his face, though the flies were gone. He smacked his lips and ran his tongue along his teeth. They were covered with a thick film. He yawned. Some water would be nice. In just a little bit. He lay on his side and tried to pull his entire body into the slender line of shade against the wall. He put his head on his hands on the ground and stared blankly. He closed his eyes. Another hour passed. A second. His eyes opened. He smacked his lips. He was entirely in sunlight. It was quite warm, and he slowly raised himself to his feet and shuffled to the water barrel. He took the metal cup and reached inside to fill it. The water was brown. A fly floated in the cup. He drank slowly.

"Having a pleasant day?" Pervides' voice startled him. He dropped the cup. "We have a third." The words awakened Samson's mind. He retrieved the cup, refilled it and downed the contents.

"And a fourth?" He said afterwards.
 "No one."
 "Then we drag someone along?"
 "Or hope the wagons bring us someone new."
 "Yes, let us hope."
 "How are you holding up?"
 "Like a beast."
 "Yes? Never forget you are a man. It is your only hope to flee."
 "Yes. I can see that. Oh, Pervides!" His voice grew suddenly excited. "I have good news. I cannot believe I forgot to tell you the other day."
 "Yes?"
 "Louis is alive. Your brother."
 Pervides was silent. His eyes flickered as he tried to digest the words. He searched as if they were spoken in a different tongue.
 "What?"
 "Louis is alive. Mirabel brought him to see me some weeks before; well, before you came with your army. He was my page. We only just figured it out when you were taken."
 "Yes. That is what she was after. Alive. But how?"
 "It was quite an astonishing story really. He went through a lot."
 "Louis is alive." Pervides said in wonder. His eyes had grown moist, and he sat beside the barrel. "I hardly knew him." Samson sat beside him. "I remember when he was born. He was so little, like a kitten. I was, what, sixteen? My mother always said we were alike, Louis and I. But is he really alive?"
 "Yes."

Chapter Thirty-one

Louis lay in the lush green grass beside the stream where as a child Mirabel had chased rabbits and dreams. He gnawed leisurely on a piece of cheese and washed it down with sips of fresh apple juice. His hair, wet from a relaxing dip in the stream, glistened in the sunlight. Nearby Mirabel sat in the shade and stared into the water. It had been five months.

The first days had been filled with a pensive joy. Her father doted on her. Her mother was a flurry of energy. "A wedding." She would say while flitting about. "We have a wedding to prepare." They measured Mirabel for a new dress. "You cannot be married in a nun's habit, now can you Mirabel?" She laughed merrily at the thought. "A good husband you have caught my darling." She said. "A count no less." Mirabel shuffled where she directed and offered no complaint, though inside she was anxious. She had told her father what Louis overheard.

"A dangerous business no doubt. We must do something, but what can we do? Let me think."

"Can't we go after them?" Mirabel said halfheartedly. She already knew the answer.

"Where? I would go myself this instant if I thought I could find him. No. Samson is a bright young man. He will fight his way out of it. I am sure of it. And if not we will find him. No, what we need is some help. I cannot fight these men Mirabel. Not if they wield the resources of the count. At the present at least. Wait, that's it!"

"What?"

"The marquis. Marquis di Alivo. If I remember correctly Samson is his nephew, or grand nephew rather. He will put these buggers in their place."

Her father was satisfied that the marquis would solve everything. Mirabel, however, was worried. A week passed, and there was no word of Samson. Mirabel spent most of her time in bed sleeping and trying to rouse some reason to move about. Her mother had given up. Though she carried on halfheartedly with her wedding plans she did not bother Mirabel with any of the details. She would visit her daughter, and they would sit in silence. Her mother would comment on how nice a day it was.

"Wouldn't you like to take a walk Mirabel?" She would ask.

"Not right now mother. Maybe later."

"Are you feeling okay Mirabel?"

"Yes mother. I'm just a little tired."

They would sit in silence.

Mirabel would read the bible and think how similar it was to the first time Samson was gone and how odd it seemed to be back in her old room.

"This is where you grew up?" Louis had asked with wonder when they arrived.

"Yes."

"Wow. It must have been great."

"It wasn't so bad."

"Why did you leave?"

"I lost faith in things."

"What?"

"In man. In love, I suppose. I had just met Samson, and then he was gone. I thought; oh I dreamed so many things. Then, nothing. I did not hear a single word from him until my father told me he was dead. I could not; I just could not stay here after that. I did not want to see my parents or anyone else I knew. I just wanted to be alone. To forget. Then like a dream Samson was back. And now he is gone again." She was crying. "It is hard to love someone at times." She said a little later. "It makes you weak. It makes you need. It is a hard thing to need someone. To know you cannot be entirely happy without them. To fear for someone and wonder whether they are safe because the remainder of your life is dependent solely on their return. It is a wicked thing to love someone who cannot return your love; to know, somewhere, he is in need and you can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to help him."

Chapter Thirty-two

Two hundred hooves thundered to a halt before the Dunvetus estate. A startled servant ran inside the manor and a few moments later the baron's secretary exited the building. He gulped ever so slightly at the battalion of armored men. Two horsemen approached.

"How may I be of service, my lord?" He addressed them.

"You may tell the lord of this house that his presence is requested outside."

"Whom shall I say requests his presence?"

"Baron ---, on behest of Marquis di Alivo."

"I will relay the message my lord." The secretary bowed and retreated inside. The baron was on the steps a few moments later. He stood proudly, though his face had been drained of its normal color.

"What is this Duncan?" He asked defiantly. "How dare you ride these men onto my land without permission. Remove them at once."

"I am afraid that will be impossible. I have in my possession a letter written by your hand, the contents of which, you are well aware, prevent any such action."

"Yes? So you have my letter. Read it out loud to all these men. See how many then will follow you."

Duncan laughed. "But you see these men do not care. They care only for the gold I place in their hands. Politics mean little to them."

"Politics? Is that what you call abduction and murder?"

"Come baron. We both know you have played the same game."

"I have done wrong, I admit, but you have gone too far. You have no right to trifle with the count."

"No? But a peasant has the right to kill a count?"

"That was in battle. It was honorable. What you have done is treasonous."

"You tired old man. I have done what was necessary."

"For yourself. I know your kind. You have probably convinced yourself you are acting to preserve the legacy of Lord Simeon, though we both know deep down that you have acted out of fear. The young count was

going to put an end to the cancer growing in his father's court. But you are a sly one. You understand the honest man too well. You knew he would go after his friend because that was the right thing to do. But pray, tell me, what do you hope to gain from all this? You have gained only a few more days in the sun. Your time shall soon run out."

"Are you quite finished? Good. I have here a signed declaration from Lord Lucius, Count di Gregoire."

"Has he read my letter?"

"Silence. As I said, I have a declaration which authorizes the seizure of your lands, by force if necessary, in remittance for the unpardonable treason you have conspired to undertake. I quote. 'The Baron of Dunvetus is hereby stripped of both lands and titles and reprimanded to custody of the officers of this court.'"

"The count, as you call him, has no authority to do this. This is outrageous. If you are going to rob me, simply rob me. If you are going to murder me, be done with it. I have instructed my men to stand down. You have no fear of them. None knew of the letter's content. You have my word, as a gentleman, that this is true."

"Very well. I accept your word, but I will need your daughter and the brat." The baron was silent. "I know they are here." The baron remained silent. "Very well. We will find them anyway." He turned to the man beside him and spoke in a low voice. "William, escort the baron to that grove of trees." He pointed down the hill, toward the stream. "Hang him. Be quick about it."

William called six men forward. "If you will follow me, my lord." He said snidely as he turned his steed toward the grove. The horsemen walked on either side as the baron followed. He held his head high and looked forward with a look of nobility.

"Search the house and all the other buildings." Duncan ordered. "Round everyone up here in front. Do not harm anyone unless they fight back. Go." The men broke into squads. Some dismounted and dashed into the house. Others circled behind to where the other buildings lay.

At the tree grove William held a noose in his hand. He smiled as he bent down to place it on the baron's neck. Suddenly the baron's eyes turned to his. They were burning with rage, and the old warrior clasped William by the arm, dragging him to the ground. A sword slashed across the baron's back, and he fell beside William. William rose first and kicked the baron as he attempted to rise. He knelt on his back and tightened the rope around the condemned man's neck. Standing, he pulled the baron to his feet. Handing the rope to one of the soldiers, he turned the baron to face him. The baron stared forward as if William did not exist. William spat on him. He did not move. The rope was strung over an overhanging branch. It settled in a groove which years before had been worn by a similar rope. A bush had grown where that corpse had been buried. If anyone had listened they would have heard it weeping. William smirked.

"When I find your daughter..." He began. The baron lunged toward him. William's hand flickered, and the rope drew taught, lifting the baron into the air. He gasped and struggled to loose the rope from his neck. His fingers scratched at his skin until he bled and his hands could no longer reach above his waist. They twitched a moment more before the light died in his eyes. William had the soldiers tie the rope to a tree before he sent them off. He walked around the body and tapped it with his hand. It spun as he walked.

"Foolish old man." He said quietly. "I'll make no such mistakes in your place. Oh, didn't you know? That's right, we've not been introduced. I am William." He held out his hand. "Soon to be the Baron of Dunvetus, if I have my way with Duncan, once he's the count." He laughed. "Oh, and I think you know my wife. A lovely lass that daughter of yours. The things I will do to her. Oh well, old man, you had your time. Don't go running off now." He laughed hysterically and slapped the body. A sudden rustling behind him startled him. He thought he heard the muffled scream of a woman, and as he turned he was hit full on by the weight of a storming child. A stick jabbed in his stomach and punctured his skin. He fell with the boy on top of him. He pushed him off and kicked him away. They regained their feet simultaneously. William drew his sword and stood dumfounded. Louis glared at him with intense hate.

"I'll be damned." William muttered. "Where the devil did you come from? Is it you boy?" Louis snorted. "After all this time. Why I'd given up on you. You cost me good boy. God, you are as dumb as ever, aren't you? What are you going to do now?" He jabbed playfully at Louis. The boy stumbled back. William laughed. "Here, let's make it fair." He threw his sword on the ground to his right. "Come on boy." He mocked. "You want to kill me, right?" Louis grunted and rushed at him. William stepped aside and tripped him. The stick rattled from his hand as he fell face down on the ground. William stepped on the back of his neck. He pressed down. Louis struggled to free himself. His face was pushed into the air, and his windpipe was being crushed.

William let up a little. "I'm not going to kill you boy. It doesn't matter anymore. My tough times are at an end. I guess I should thank you. If I would have got away with that money I wouldn't be where I am today. No, I'm not going to kill you." He lifted his foot off Louis' neck. The boy began to cough. "Come on, up with you. Up to the house and in line with everyone else." He kicked Louis lightly, and he began slowly to rise. William turned to retrieve his sword and met the arcing blade with his face. The blow knocked him to the ground. Shocked, he managed with one eye to glimpse the figure of a nun towering over him before he felt the intense pain of steel being driven into his throat. He reached hopelessly upward with his hand. It fell. His leg twitched a moment, and then he was still. Mirabel backed away and bumped against her father's body. Louis was crying. He sat on the ground staring. Mirabel moved to the tree and attempted to untie the rope. It was too tight so she withdrew the sword from William. Her father's body fell in a clump when she cut the cord, and she knelt beside him. His eyes stared glass like into the emptiness of death, and she shuddered. Kissing him on the forehead she closed his eyes with her hand and softly mouthed the word, "goodbye." Her hand lingered on his face as she stood, and then straightening herself she looked to Louis.

"Come, we must hurry." She said purposefully. "Fetch the satchel from the bushes. Wiping his eyes Louis complied and returned with a bundle. It was wrapped in a blanket and bound by a leather strap. Mirabel took it from him, set it on the ground and helped Louis onto William's horse. She handed him the bundle and clambered up behind. Glancing at her father's corpse she crossed herself and spurred the horse toward the stream.

Chapter Thirty-three

"Where are we going?" Louis asked when they stopped that night in a small grove of trees.

"To Venice." Mirabel answered as she unrolled the parcel. "We should meet the road from Brescia tomorrow. We must reach the marquis. Here." She handed him a piece of bread. "Eat up. Then we must sleep. We must be moving as soon as the sun is up." She lay two blankets on the ground. When they were finished eating they curled up together between them. As Louis drifted off to sleep he could hear her weeping. She held him in her arms, and he could feel the heaving in her chest. He wanted to say something but fell asleep before he could think of the proper words. The next he knew he was being shaken by the shoulder.

"Wake up Louis." Mirabel said softly. She was crouched beside him. "We must be going." He opened his eyes. The sky was gray with the beginning dawn. Mirabel smiled. "Good morning." He sat up, and she handed him some bread and a few slices of dried venison. While he ate she placed the remaining food and a bag of coins in the blankets and rolled them up. A few minutes later they were riding through the wood. The morning air was chill, but Louis, lodged between the horse's neck and Mirabel's breast, was warm. He could feel her breath on the back of his neck. He dozed off and on, his head drooping until it snapped upright and he glanced about to find the same mix of unremarkable trees and dirt that were always seemingly there. They stopped when the sun neared its zenith and rested in the shade of a cypress tree. They ate a little, and Mirabel napped about an hour before they were off again.

They spoke very little in the days that passed. Once they reached the road they traveled mostly by night, riding by day only to replenish their supplies at passing towns. After the third day Mirabel was more relaxed and stopped glancing behind them.

"I really liked your father." Louis said once while they were riding.

"So did I Louis." Mirabel responded. They did not speak again for hours.

In Padua they fell in with three monks also traveling to Venice. One was named Bernard, the second Alberto and the last Simon. Alberto was a giant of a man. He stood a full head above his companions, and gowned in fur he might have been mistaken for a bear. He carried a bible in his left hand and a cross in his right. "As the Lord deems it to be, it shall be." He often said, whether the question put to him be quite simple or monstrously complex. Otherwise he was silent.

Bernard was an elderly man. What little hair remained on his head had long ago turned white. He wore a thin gold ring on his left index finger. "I was married very young." He told Mirabel. "It was not but three months before the Lord called my wife back to Him. I gave up everything after that, except this ring" "That is so

sad." Mirabel said. "No, no." He answered. "I have thought a lot about it over these years. At least I knew what it was to love and be loved. We do not all fall in love. I was blessed, though the first did destroy the second." Mirabel wept. Though he asked she would not say why.

Simon was young. Large buck teeth and an overbite made him resemble a squirrel. His black hair was wavy, and his eyebrows pointed up at the ends. He was simple and laughed at the most trivial things. When he did his entire body shook and he placed his hands on his stomach. Sometimes he would laugh so hard he could not stop for minutes, and when he finally did he would forget why he started laughing and laugh at the oddity that he had forgotten. The three were returning to Venice from Geneva.

"It is good to be near the sea again." Bernard said. "The mountain climate does not suit my bones."

"Is Geneva a nice city?" Mirabel asked. They were on the road. The monks had let Louis ride on their pack mule, which at the end of such a long journey carried very little else.

"Oh yes. It sits in a beautiful valley with mountains all around. There is a great big lake, and the people are ever so pleasant. Though, I must admit, we did not see much of the city. We were indoors most of the time."

"Why were you there?"

"To copy some manuscripts. A monastery has some rare copies of old Greek texts. Euclid for one. He was a mathematician. Also Pythagoras and Hesiod. Many of the ancient writings are becoming quite scarce. For the last thirty years I have done little else but copy manuscripts. Alberto has been my apprentice for the past ten, while this was Simon's first journey. He may seem a little slow at times, but he works hard and he writes beautiful script."

"And the church supports you in this?"

"Rome? No. Constantinople funds my travels, and though I have been directed to consider Christian texts of most import, it is in my charter to copy any text of cultural, historical or religious importance."

"It sounds interesting."

"Yes? Well, I enjoy it. I have read things that absolutely surprised me. There were brilliant men in the past. Philosophers, historians, mathematicians, poets. There is such a base of knowledge available to us, but it is being lost. That is the sad part of what I do; knowing I may be one of the last people to read some of these works. In some cases even the last." Bernard was choked up. He coughed softly and shrugged his shoulders. "As brother Alberto says, as the Lord deems it to be, it shall be. My, look at that view."

They had reached the crest of a hill and beyond a field and bluff the Adriatic sparkled with all its turquoise splendor. A dozen sheep grazed in the field and baaed from time to time. At the far side, overlooking the bluff and the sea, stood a small stone house. A column of smoke crept from the chimney, and as the riders watched a woman came to the door. She whistled, and a shepherd popped up from the grass. He said a few short commands to his dog and bounded off toward the hut. The party headed off before he reached the woman, though Louis, looking back, saw them embrace as they met, before heading inside, presumably to eat. Louis lingered behind a moment, taking in the scene. When he turned to catch up with the group there were tears in his eyes.

Chapter Thirty-four

They parted with the monks on the outskirts of Venice.

"Sister, you are welcome to stay at our monastery if you wish. There are five nuns there now. They will be glad to have your pleasant company."

"Thank you brother, but I have urgent business to attend to. Can you tell me where I might find the estate of the Marquis di Alivo?"

"Why certainly. It is quite difficult to miss though. You have never been to Venice before?"

"Once, but I was quite young."

"If you wish brother Simon may accompany you. He knows the way."

"That would be quite helpful. Thank you."

"It has been a pleasure sister."

"Likewise brother. Brother Alberto. Best wishes on all your journeys."

"The Lord be with you sister. Lead on Simon."

"Is it far?" Mirabel asked after they had gone on a quarter mile or so.

"Oh, not too far." Simon chuckled. "The other side of town. A giant house."

"Have you been there before?"

"By it sister. Never in."

"Oh. Have you been a monk long brother Simon?"

"A year, or less. Duncan is my grandfather. He raised me with the monks."

"What about your parents?"

"Dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Ah, I have never known them."

"Don't you wonder who they were?"

"No."

"Do you wish they were still alive?"

"I've never thought of it."

"Do you have any other family?"

"The brothers. They look after me."

"Do you ever think there might be more to life; something grander; more, I don't know."

"No."

"You never dream?"

"Oh yes." He laughed. "I dreamed the other night that I was a squirrel. Oh I had such fun. Jumping. Running. It was grand."

"I meant the other kind of dream. Don't you ever think about your future?"

"No." He scratched his head. "Why would I? Oh, look at that." He pointed to a dog standing on its hind legs. Its master snapped his fingers, and the dog spun in a circle. It looked like it was dancing. Simon laughed loudly.

"This place sure is big." Louis said, drawing the mule close to Mirabel. "There are so many people."

"Yes, one can be forgotten in such a town."

"I don't think I would like to live here."

"Nor I Louis."

"They don't seem very happy."

"Who?"

"The people."

Mirabel looked about at the faces and realized Louis was right. A few people smiled as they paused to chat, but a great many rushed about with a strange blankness in their eyes. It varied. In some it bore a hint of determination, in others boorishness. Some walked with the air of deceit. They walked quick, these city folk, as if they all were being pursued. "Businessmen." Simon added. "My grandfather says they only smile if they are cheating someone." The streets became more crowded, and the throes of unhappy men were mingled amongst a crowd of various types. "The market." Simon noted. Here the sound of laughter could be heard, along with the merchant's shouts and a great deal of bickering. Louis suddenly burst out laughing.

"What?" Mirabel asked mirthfully.

"It reminds me of a flock of sparrows fighting over a pile of crumbs, especially if you turn your head and watch from the corner of your eye." Simon began to laugh, more at Louis' laughter than his words. Mirabel did not laugh.

"It makes me sad." She said. To her eyes the shifting mass of people was something else; a few of the countless steps taken in every life adverse to the beauty with which life should be lived. The exact incongruity she would never be able to put to words, but in the frenetic market she lost a little more faith in the goodness of man. There was something wrong in it all. But what? She could not isolate it enough to comprehend.

They road in silence for awhile, until the streets were nearly empty and the compact clutter of shops and houses had been replaced by large homes with yards and gates. Simon pointed to a large estate they were

nearing on the left. "There." He said. The manor was massive, and above the gates rose two bronze stallions pawing at the air."

"Thank you brother." Mirabel said as Simon turned toward town.

"My pleasure sister." He was gone, taking with him the mule Louis had been riding. Mirabel also dismounted, and they approached the gate. A guard appeared on the other side and addressed them through the bars.

"May I help you sister?" He asked politely.

"Yes. I have urgent business to discuss with his excellency the marquis concerning his grand nephew, the Count di Gregoire. It is vital I speak with him."

"I am afraid the marquis is away sister, but if your business is as important as you make it sound."

"It is."

"It is just you and the boy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Come on in."

"Thank you." The gate swung open, and they entered. The guard closed the gate and motioned with his arm for them to head toward the manor.

"Whom shall I say requests an audience sister?"

"Lady, actually."

"My apologies my lady."

"No need. You may announce lady Mirabel, daughter of the late Baron of Dunvetus, betrothed of Lord Samson, Count di Gregoire." The guard started ever so slightly. He knocked on the front door, and it was opened from the inside. He whispered something to the doorman, bowed and departed.

"Welcome my lady." The doorman said. "If you will please follow me." He led them a few dozen paces and opened a door to the left. "If you will be so kind as to wait, I will fetch someone."

"Thank you." Mirabel said, and they entered the room. There were three couches of white cloth, embroidered in gold, as well as a half dozen chairs and a small table. A bowl of fruit, a pitcher of water and four silver cups occupied the table.

"May I have a drink?" Louis asked.

"Yes, that is what it is for."

"Everything just seems so nice. I don't want to get in trouble."

"Don't worry Louis." She took an apricot from the bowl and took a bite. It was sweet and the juice dribbled down her chin. She wiped her face with her hand and, finishing the apricot, walked to the window. She threw the pit out.

"Louis, come look." He joined her at the window. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" The window overlooked a garden. It was in bloom with a rainbow of colors.

"I've never seen so many flowers."

"Nor I."

"Look at all the bees."

"Yes, this must be heaven for them."

"It smells nice too."

The door opened, and a man entered. He bowed, straightened up and announced, "her excellency, the Marchioness di Alivo." He bowed again and held the door open as an elderly woman in a flowing sky blue gown entered. Mirabel bowed. Louis gingerly did the same. The marchioness approached, took Mirabel's face in her hands and prompted her to rise. She studied Mirabel. Her eyes were soft, appreciative and made Mirabel feel at ease.

"Mirabel?" The Marchioness inquired. She let her hands fall at her side.

"Yes your excellency."

"Samson did not lie when he described you. Though you look wearied my dear. Come, sit. Tell me what brings you here under such circumstances. I fear they are not well. Oh, and who is this?" She turned to Louis.

"Louis, your excellency." Mirabel answered.

"It is nice to meet you my dear." The marchioness touched him on the cheek. "Now, Mirabel, or is it sister?"

"Mirabel." She answered with a blush. "I should be a nun no longer if all was well."

The marchioness took Mirabel by the arm and led her to one of the couches. They sat beside each other, and she said, "Now, tell me all."

Mirabel did. The marchioness held her hand, and when Mirabel wept in telling of the sorrows and joys she had known since first she met Samson, she placed her arm on Mirabel's back to comfort her. "My poor girl." She said more than once or, "oh dear me." "A tragedy." She said when Mirabel related her father's death. "Oh, these men will pay." Her face was red with anger. At the end, when Mirabel was exhausted from the telling, the marchioness lay her back and told her to rest. "You have done the right thing, coming here, my dear. We will make everything right, I assure you. The marquis will be here within three days, and he can deal with that wretched baron. In the meantime I will send out men in search of Samson and make sure it is well known in every camp of parasitic slave traders that the man who returns the count shall be well rewarded. Do not worry my dear, all shall be well. Just rest here. I will send someone for you later to show you to your room."

"Thank you." Mirabel said dreamily. The marchioness petted her cheek for a minute until she had begun to fall asleep. Rising she glanced at Louis. He had long before fallen asleep on one of the other couches. The marchioness sighed, shook her head and left the room.

Chapter Thirty-five

A black beetle paused in its footsteps to investigate a grain of dirt which seemed, just a bit, to resemble food. It touched it with its feelers, backed its head away a moment and tested again. It took a few steps before pausing, turning in a circle and returning to the spot. Its mouth twitched. Its middle left foot rose a little into the air. It touched the grain once more. It raised its head. Then in a quick motion it swallowed the particle. A shadow. It took three steps before the giant foot of a man stamped it into the ground.

"They cheat you Lucius." Duncan continued as he wiped his foot on the ground to remove the beetle's guts. "You are entitled much more."

"Yes, but we don't really need it, do we?" Lucius answered. "We bring in as much from the mines as we do in taxes anymore."

"We are not talking about gold alone but grain. You have a very large household to feed here. It is the duty of the peasants to provide for you."

"Yes, but they have said this would leave them short for themselves."

"Short? Bah. Oh, they may make a little less beer for themselves, but trust me, no one will go hungry for this. Not unless they make beer instead of bread. And if they do, it is their own fault. Mind you, my boy, the peasant is a wily creature. He will cheat you blind if he gets the chance. No, you must stay atop of him, otherwise he will grow fat and indolent, like a bear in a meat shop. He is not like you, the common man, make no mistake about it. You have to take care of him lest he ruin himself, others and you."

"But do they really think like that? The peasants I have met have seemed quite pleasant for the most part. A little rough no doubt but pleasant nonetheless."

"Pleasant? Oh my young lord, you have so much to learn. The peasant does not think like you or I. He thinks only of his stomach, his ale and his lust. He is pleasant to you because he has been trained to be pleasant. Believe me, he grumbles when your workmen collect his taxes. No, he grumbles the moment you turn your back. The ingrate. After all you do for him."

"What is that? What do I do for the common man?"

"Do you not know? You protect him from the ruin of himself."

"Truly?"

"Yes."

"And it will not hurt anyone to raise the taxes?"

"Not at all."

"Very well. Have the proclamation drawn up."

"It has already been done, my lord."

"Oh. Is there anything else Duncan?"

"No, that was the last of it. With your grace I shall take my leave."

"Yes, of course. Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Have you heard anything more of my brother?"

"Sadly, no my lord."

"It has been nearly two months. I should have thought he would be home by now."

"Yes, I too worry over him."

"I don't know I will ever forgive him."

"Your brother?"

"Yes. Is it all true then?"

"What is that my lord?"

"What you told me about the plot. Him, that Pervides fellow and the baron."

"On my oath my lord. I have always told you the truth."

"I shall never forgive him."

"He never was like your father. Not like you. You should have been the first born. You have the strength to rule. Your brother does not. Perhaps it is best he has gone."

"What do I do when he returns? If he had a hand in my father's death; I cannot let him strut around like a peacock."

"No you can't."

"But what is to be done? People like Samson. They have always liked him better. I liked him. To think I ran to him when he came home and cried like a silly child to see him back from the dead. And all that time he had been plotting to kill our own father. God, I hate him for it."

"So you should. So you should."

"When he comes back I shall kill him."

"My lord?"

"Yes I said it. I mean it too. He cannot get away with it. I won't let him."

"Are you sure my lord?"

"Absolutely."

"In that case, my lord, I offer you my allegiance."

"Thank you Duncan."

"You are in the right. It is the right thing to do. Now, if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to."

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you my lord count." The last word fell from his lips with particular emphasis, and after a short bow he turned from Lucius and walked casually from the room. Once out of the chamber he chuckled to himself. "The poor naïve child." He whispered. "He will do for me a thousand times better than his father." He strolled leisurely down the hall to the old count's rooms. He had occupied them since Simeon's death. "I will have lunch now." He told his serving man as he entered the outer room. The man bowed.

"Will the young lady be joining you?" The servant asked.

"What? No. Is she still here?"

"Yes my lord."

"Why? Andre, tell her to go away." He walked past the servant and entered the small dining chamber which connected both to the outer room and the bedroom. A few moments later the bedroom door opened and Andre entered.

"Pardon my lord, but the young lady will not leave."

"What? Why not?"

"She wishes to speak with you first my lord."

"Oh, of all things. Okay, send her in." The servant disappeared momentarily before returning with a young woman. By no means beautiful she was not, however, plain. There was an alluring quality in her rosy cheeks and wavy brown hair which fell flat beyond her shoulders. Her bosom was large and heaved as she breathed. Her nose was a little off but not enough to draw attention, while her lips wore a perpetual pouting

expression. She wore a handsome brown dress and a silver ring on her right hand. "Well, what is it?" Duncan asked with irritation. His eyes were intense, brooding. He tapped his fingers on the table.

"I just wanted to tell you." She mumbled. She rung her hands and stared timidly at the ground.

"What? Speak up girl."

"I just wanted to tell you." She said more firmly. "I shan't come here again."

"Is that all? Very well. You said it, you may go."

"You don't care at all do you?" She said in an almost pleading voice. "After all you've said I was just a piece of flesh to you."

"What did you expect dear?" Duncan said roughly. He looked her fully in the face for the first time. "Run along home now."

"You have ruined me."

"Oh, come now. If it had not been me it would have been some soldier or blacksmith."

"I doubt they could be so two faced as you. A gentleman? Ha! How have I been so blind? Have you meant a word; a single word?"

"You are a pleasant girl, but what did you expect? You knew what I was after. It was, after all, the same as you were after. I never made much pretense about it did I? Did I promise you a thing?"

"No."

"No. That's right. We had our fun. How long since we first met Isabella?"

"Three weeks."

"Have you enjoyed these three weeks?"

"Yes."

"Then why the fuss? You say you shall come no more. So be it. We have enjoyed our time together. That is all that matters. What more can be expected out of life than that?" A knock at the door. "Bring it in Andre. Goodbye Isabella. If you change your mind you are welcome to return."

"Yes? And how many others have the same invitation?"

"Never you mind. Run along now. I need to be alone."

"This way madam." Andre led Isabella to the door. "Anything else my lord?" He asked after she had left.

"No. Close the door Andre. Oh wait. Fetch Gavick." The servant bowed and left the room. Taking a piece of bread from the tray Andre had placed on the table Duncan walked into his bedroom. From a finely engraved oak chest he retrieved a large paper. It was rolled tightly and bound by a green ribbon. He shut the chest and returned to the dining room, munching contentedly on the bread. He sat down and selected a pheasant leg from the platter. He had only just finished when the door opened and Gavick was shown in. He was a tall man with a hook nose and squinty eyes which made him appear devious. His bow was frivolous, false.

"How may I be of service my lord?" He asked respectfully.

Duncan held out the scroll. "Have copies made of this and see that it is posted and proclaimed in town." Gavick approached and took the paper. "See that it is done today."

"Yes my lord."

"That is all."

Gavick bowed and left the room. Duncan picked at a piece of ham while turning something over in his mind. He took up a small bell which sat on the tray and rang it. A moment later Andre appeared. "You can take this away." He motioned to the food. "How are things for tonight?"

"Very well sir. The huntsmen brought in two fine boars. The cook says they will be delicious."

"Good. Shall everyone be there?"

"I have not heard otherwise my lord."

"Good. Send word to the stable to ready my horse. I feel like a ride."

"Yes my lord." Andre took leave. A moment later there was the sound of scuffling in the hall, and Duncan stood to investigate. The door opened and an elderly man in rich attire entered. Two others, younger, though no less noble in appearance, followed. In the hall Andre was being held against the wall by the soldier Abner Vilni.

"What?" Words failed Duncan. The elderly man glanced at him with a look similar to that of a man glancing at a cockroach.

"Sit." He said authoritatively. Duncan obeyed. The younger men posted themselves at the two doors. The older man sat across from Duncan. Taking time to remove his gloves, he crossed his legs and stared at Duncan. "Do you know who I am?" He said at last.

"Yes." Duncan answered. His voice was quivering like a child caught in the act of some monstrously ridiculous crime. "How may I be of service your excellency?" The words were spoken as a rite. He had turned pale.

"Tell me where Samson is." The marquis said sternly.

"I do not know." Duncan answered. His shoulders fell as if they had been suddenly placed beneath a great burden.

"Then you are of no use to me. Take him away John." He added to one of his men. The two advanced to Duncan. He tried to stand but fell back meekly into his chair. The men pulled him to his feet and led him from the room. They descended to the dungeon and at the far end of a dank tunnel locked him in the same cell in which Samson had briefly imprisoned him. He sat quietly on the floor and stared at the darkness. When he was alone he cursed. After that he hung his head and was motionless. The dark crept in around him and played with his mind. "I am lost." He said at last and lay on the ground weeping.

The marquis had not moved when his men returned. "Fetch Lucius." He ordered, and the men did as he bid, returning after a few minutes with the presiding count. "Sit down." He said after Lucius had bowed and saluted him. "Thank you John, Antonio. You may leave us. See to rounding up the rest of these scoundrels."

"My lord." Said each in turn with a bow as they left the room.

"Now, Lucius." The marquis said in a fatherly tone. "How old are you now?"

"Seventeen sir."

"A fine age indeed. Do not be in a hurry to grow up my boy." He adjusted himself in his chair and his face became stern. "Tell me, where do you think your brother has gone?"

"Samson? Why he went after that Pervides fellow. Good riddance too. I hope I never see him again."

"Why is that?"

"Why, have you not heard what he did to father?"

"What is that?"

"He had him killed. He and that Pervides, and the old Baron of Dunvetus."

"And where is the baron?"

"In the dungeons my lord."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, why?"

"He is dead."

"What?"

"Your Baron of ---- hung him."

"What? I told him to do no such thing."

"No, I did not think you did. You have been deceived my boy, about that and much more." The marquis preceded to tell Lucius the truth, barring his own involvement in the death of Simeon. At the end Lucius was docile.

"I said just today I would kill my brother." He said placidly. "Now; where is he? Duncan will hang for this."

"God willing that will not be your decision."

"Have you heard anything?"

"No, but it is too soon. It has been less than ten days since we sent our men. They will turn up something, but it may be a long road."

"What a fool I have been. I thought Duncan was, if not my friend, looking out for my best interest out of respect for my father. Now I see what he is and has always been. I see what kind of man my father was. What kind of man I might have become. I am like my father. His faults are my faults."

"As his virtues are yours."

"Yes? Had he any?"

"He was brave, your father, if nothing else."

"Yes he was."

"And he was proud."

"Is it virtuous to be proud?"

"To a certain point. It is when pride becomes vanity or arrogance that it becomes wrong."

"He was these."

"But you do not have to be. However, you must have pride."

"Did you know my mother well?" Lucius asked after a moment of thought.

"Yes."

"I do not remember her."

"You were quite young."

"Was she kind?"

"Yes."

"Beautiful?"

"Very much so."

"And you loved her?"

"As if she was my own daughter."

"Did she love my father?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Would she have if she knew...?" He broke off. "If she knew the things he had done?"

"I do not know."

"I do."

"What?"

"Still love him. I cannot condemn him, despite what you have told me, and what more, I know, in his place, I may have done, not necessarily the same thing, but something similar. Is that wrong?"

"It depends on how much a human life is worth."

"How much is that?"

"That is something you must learn. It is not the same for every person. For some only their own life is worth anything. For others all lives are equal. For the most of us it is somewhere in between."

"Is there no way to determine the true way we should treat others?"

"Perhaps, but I have not learned it. Some say it is in the bible."

"Not you?"

"I? I have not read it through for many years. I have meant to. It just always seems to get pushed off, and now I am an old man. Beware of time Lucius. If not your life will pass and you will miss it. But come, let us not speak of such things just yet. Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Let us go to the hall. There are some people I would like you to meet. Have you met Samson's betrothed?"

"I was not aware..."

"Yes, to the daughter of the late Baron of Dunvetus."

"Oh, the nun. What was her name?"

"Mirabel. So you have met."

"No, but I knew she was wont to visit him. Is she here?"

"Shortly. There are some others I would like you to meet. You briefly met two. The gentlemen that brought you to me."

"Oh yes?"

"The one I called John is the Viscount of S---. He shall remain here until your brother returns. He is an honest man and will teach you a great deal if you are honest in return. A good man through and through. He has been with me for some thirty years. Ah, here we are. John!"

"Your excellency."

"May I formally introduce Lucius, younger brother of the absent count. Lucius, John, the Viscount of S---

--."

"A pleasure." John bowed. He wore a pleasant smile.

"I am honored."

"How goes the hunt?" The marquis asked.

"Quite well. That man Abner has been a godsend. The young lady was right to put us on to him. It is rare to find such an honest man. A fine candidate for captain of the guard the way I see it."

"How many do you think it will be?"

"I am sure it was only a handful that really knew what was going on. Half a dozen maybe. The rest were incidental for the most part. There are a few bad characters but most were probably just doing what they were told. Surviving you know. No need for a witch hunt. Though, Lucius, I would like your account of things. See if you think of anyone we have missed or arrested without merit."

"Any help I can be, I am at your service."

"After we eat." The marquis interrupted. "There is plenty of time to sort this all out." They seated themselves at the high table where the servants had arranged an assortment of meats, cheeses and breads, along with some apples, water and wine. They ate heartily and spoke of lighter things.

Chapter Thirty-six

Gruel. Every meal it was the same. Tasteless, lumpy gruel. Samson hated it. He hated the bell which foretold its presence and the hidden hand which placed it through the hole. He would sooner eat chestnuts. His muscles felt like they had been used by a horse. He was always weary. A whip had cut his shoulder a few days back, and it did not seem to be healing. It stung all day in the salt mines, and when he washed it out that night he felt sure he was beginning to come down with a fever. It would be his death.

The door rattled and swung open. Two men were pushed into the yard. They stared dumbfounded. One man turned suddenly to the door and pounded on it. He screamed something in a foreign tongue which sounded like pleading. The door opened. He received a cudgel to the face. Two more men left the entry and made haste to move away from the guards. Of the third set, one man bore the appearance of a dog who has been beaten so many times it has lost all will to defend itself. He seemed to cower even when the door had closed and he was for all purposes alone. The second man, however, seemed entirely indifferent to the situation. No sooner had he entered the yard then he bent down and took up a rock. He looked it over with a curious glance and casually strolled to the center square. He sat down and studied the rock intently for a moment. Then he looked up, rolled the stone in his hand for a moment and tossed it into the yard. He looked about with a casualness that seemed to Samson both diffident and perceptive. He stretched his hands above his head and yawned. He noticeably shrugged his shoulders, lowered himself to a comfortable position and closed his eyes. Samson found himself smiling. Surely this was their man.

"Well?" Pervides said quietly as he squatted beside Samson. He held an empty tin in his hand.

"That one seems the best bet." He nodded to the napping man.

"Agreed. Let me know." He stood and continued to drop his tin through the opening. Samson waited a few moments before doing the same. He went to the water bucket and, after waiting in line behind two others, had a drink. He walked around the yard a few times before settling next to the new arrival. The man did not stir.

"Italian?" Samson asked quietly, hoping to not wake the man if he was indeed asleep.

"French-Gaelic." The other answered without opening his eyes. "How may I help you?" His Italian was accented and slow, but it was clear.

"How have you come here?"

The man's eyes opened slightly, and he glanced quickly at Samson before they closed again. "That is not the question you meant to ask."

"No, but I should like to know."

"Business first, whatever it may be, then I shall tell you if you still would like to know. It is not necessary, I am quite content to rest."

"Yes, so you should be. Little enough you shall receive of it here."

"Your question."

"Escape?"

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Fine."

"That is it? You don't want to know how?"

"Is there anything you can say that I cannot be shown more easily beforehand?"

"Why no, but..."

"Then let us discuss it no further. It is not best to speak of such things I gather by the briefness with which you and your friend spoke."

"My friend?"

"Yes, the one sitting to my right side, fourth stall from the left."

Samson took a moment to verify this was indeed Pervides. "How?"

"Did I know? It was quite apparent, to me at least. The both of you lit up when you were together, and the fondness with which he clasped your leg was a give away. I trust you were friends before you came here."

"Yes, but..."

"I thought so. I doubt too many friendships are forged in such a place as this."

"No, I suppose you are right. You notice a lot for a man who feigns to be asleep."

"It is my way. I tend to keep one eye on my surroundings. The other is free to dream."

"Can you really dream with such a keen eye on reality?"

"Trust me, the one eye is not usually quite so keen as you have been led to believe. If it was I would not be here."

"What happened?"

"I dozed off beneath a oak tree, thinking myself alone in the world, then a crack on my head and there I was with chains around my feet."

"When was this?"

"A month, month and a half ago. God knows why they dragged me all the way to this desert. Strange business this slavery. You think they would lose money on the transport. How does one become a slave trader I wonder? They cannot all be godless brutes. No, I suppose for many it is just business. Ignorance I guess. No one could treat people like that if they knew the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"The truth. You know; the way things actually are and should be."

"You know this?"

"Me? Oh no. I am an incontinent dreamer; I know only the passing fancies of my mind and feelings."

"But they tell you something don't they. You speak too confidently to truly know nothing."

"I am confident only that I feel. Whether these feelings are truth I do not know."

"Then what do your feelings tell you?"

"That if men knew the truth they would be kind and that they would live in joy."

"Do you live as such?"

"I try. I believe I succeed a fair part of the time. I have a little herd of sheep and a little farm. What I cannot grow on my own I trade for wool or a little work. I lie in my fields and watch the clouds. I play with my dog, and we lie close to feel each other's warmth. I wonder at the birds and dream of flying, trying to conceptualize some machine which could lift me into the sky. I wonder at God and laugh. I dig in the earth and absorb its essence. I smile as I plant a seed, knowing that as the weeks pass on it shall grow and nourish me. I pet my sheep, and I weep when I must slaughter one in the winter so that I might live. I kiss its head and apologize, deeply, honestly, for taking its life. When I have taken all the meat I bury the bones, save one which I leave a little meat on for my dog to gnaw upon. Sometimes I walk into town and speak to people, wondering why they burden themselves so with worrying about seemingly every aspect of their lives. I smile at children and imagine what they will be when they grow up. I see old men and wonder who they were as children. And I laugh. I smile at pretty women and consider if I might like any of them as my wife. On occasion I get drunk with the townsmen and watch them fight or sing songs. Sometimes I sit up in the night and watch the stars, and I think, I am glad to be alive. But then I wonder, when I die where shall I be, and I eagerly consider that after I have lived my fill I shall know. It is a wonderful thing this life, even here, where we sit now."

"How can you say that?"

"It is all in how you perceive things. Don't you see; if you feel joy inside there is nothing anyone can do to ruin you. Why, you must be innocent like the child. That is wisdom; listening to that true voice within yourself despite how it contradicts the world around you. A man must have faith in himself, as a child has faith that his notions are correct."

"But is a child not more ignorant than the men you spoke of previously?"

"Yes and no. It is a different type of ignorance. The young child does not know the world. It knows only self. The purest man alive is the newborn child. If a man could maintain the purity of a newborn while compiling the knowledge of this earth he would no doubt be the wisest and most happy of individuals."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes, I suppose. It has never seemed to me a thing to believe, just something that is. Don't tell me you do not understand. Everyone has such feelings, though they be of differing things."

"Yes, I believe I understand. Actually, I know exactly." Samson thought suddenly of his father. He said no more.

"Until tomorrow?" The man said after a few moments of silence.

"Yes." Samson said offhandedly. "Oh, yes. Look for my friend, the one you pointed out. You must be chained to him. There is a fourth too. I do not know him. He and I will go together."

"Very well. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Samson rose and took a circuitous rout to his own partition, whispering, "it is set," to Pervides as he passed. The stranger remained where he was, bowing his head once more to apparent sleep. The night closed in, and the stars lit the sky with their pricks of light. Samson lay awake and told himself to sleep. It was some time before he actually did.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Samson did not resist as an unusually surly guard pushed him away. His eyes closed as he tumbled onto the hard ground of the yard. His shoulder stung as he lay momentarily coughing in the light dust cloud which rose about him. Keeping his eyes down, so as to avoid the eyes of the guard, he stood and rejoined the line. All was not lost. After tossing him back on such a whim as they sometimes had, the guards had taken the new man in his place. Pervides had slipped back in line and now stood in front of Samson. The next pair was taken. Samson's heart beat, and he stared intently at the dirt. Pervides stumbled a little as they were called forward. Samson bumped into him. He pushed Pervides a little. Pervides turned and spat at him, swearing in Greek. Samson cursed in Italian, and the guards, chaining them together, laughed as the two men glared at each other. As soon as they were in the hallway Samson heard an audible sigh from Pervides' chest. No, all was not lost. Four was still four, no matter how it was arranged.

In the bright sunlight, while they shuffled to the mines, Samson chanced to look at his friend. At that moment he remembered who he had been. He saw the strong young man who bested Giuseppe. He saw also the determined castaway etching out a sailing boat board by board with stone tools and a single knife. He saw him before his father, with that proud, yet apologetic, look, which seemed to say, "I love you Samson, yet I must do this." He remembered him as he lay unconscious; his father's killer; so weak, so humble. And now he staggered by his side with a scraggly beard and rags scarce capable of covering his frame. His arms were still muscular but sinewy. His face was worn. He looked tired. So very tired, as if at any moment he might decide to lie down and sleep the final sleep. And Samson knew his own face must look much the same. It would change this day, one way or another. Better to die a man than to live as a bestial slave. He caught Pervides' eye. It flashed with assurance. Beneath his broken gait and bowed back there remained the free man ready to reassert himself when the moment came. Samson asked himself whether the same free man lived within him, ready to rise, not only from slavery but from hypocrisy. He held onto one thing in these weak days: that if he returned home he would attempt to be a better man. He could not put to thought exactly what he meant by better, but he felt it. This sense would guide him. To where he did not know, but it must be heeded if ever he was to progress.

As the first block of salt touched his shoulder Samson sighed ever so briefly from relief. The last hurdle had been breached. They were four of the eight consigned to hauling the chunks to the wagons. But how the day dragged on. The sun did not move. It seemed every time he glanced up it hung in the same place. He began to count each trip to and from the salt pile. He counted each leg. He counted each step. The sun did not seem to move. The pile of salt did not seem to shrink. It felt like he was hauling the same stone over and over, as if time had ceased. Then it was water break. Each man received a ladle full of water, and then it was back to work. The next break would be lunch. And then after lunch, another hour or so.

When at last they ate Samson wanted to save his crust of bread. There was nowhere to hide it. He was eager now, come what may. He closed his eyes and tried to envision the escape. He could see nothing. He ate his bread, drank his water and waited. The call for work soon sounded, and suddenly he was lighthearted. He had to fight to keep from smiling. He lifted the rocks of salt with vigor and began to dream of freedom; of the first unshackled step; the first sip of wine and fire roasted steak. Of the sea, of apple juice and Mirabel's kiss.

"The next pass." Pervides' words made Samson's heart jump. Though they had been whispered as the four men passed, they rung in his mind as if they had been shouted. His heartbeat grew rapid, and he began to perspire more rapidly than before. Lifting the large chunk of salt to his shoulder, he felt nothing. The feeling of his skin was otherworldly and distant. The pounding of his heart and temples were real. His mouth grew cottony, and his legs trembled just a little as they approached the ramp. At the top the two others moved toward the cart. They placed their load in the wagon and turned. Samson saw in their eyes the same excitement growing in his own. Pervides made a small clicking noise with the side of his mouth, as one makes to a horse, and Samson was sprinting by his side to the two nearest guards. He threw his salt brick into the man's chest and knocked him to the ground. Pervides had done likewise a split moment before and now was crushing the man's skull with the cudgel he had taken from his hand. Samson reached for the same device in his keeper's grasp. It would not budge. The man was struggling to move the rock and held tight to his weapon, though Samson pulled with two hands. Precious moments were fading away. Pervides bludgeoned the man across the face, and he let go. There was shouting. Two more guards approached, one armed with a sword, the other a cudgel. Pervides and Samson stood their ground. The man with the sword swung at Samson. He dove on the ground, and the blade sliced through his injured shoulder. The man recovered to block Pervides' attack, but he failed to prevent Samson's blow to his knee. The limb buckled, and Pervides broke the man's arm with a powerful down-stroke. He screamed and dropped the sword. Pervides gathered it from the ground, and they ran past the body of the second guard, whom had been strangled by the chain which bound their fellow slaves. Samson dropped the cudgel and held his shoulder with his left hand. The blood was warm and slid down his arm to spatter in the sand. He was weak, and he could feel himself slowing down. The two men ahead were moving faster, and once they turned to urge him on. Pervides waved for them to go on ahead. After a slight pause, they did so. Suddenly everything was spinning, black. Calm overtook Samson, and he seemed to be floating.

"Come, lean on me." He heard Pervides' voice as if from another world. He could feel his legs still moving. He was walking like a drunk. "The sun still has not moved." He thought, and he realized he was lying on his back. Something was tugging at his arm. Slowly his eyes opened, and he was aware. He lay in the sand. Pervides was beside him tying the remnants of his tunic around Samson's shoulder. Pervides was naked except for his underclothes and a worn pair of sandals. Samson looked about and saw only blue sky and sand. They were at the bottom of a small dune. Their footsteps traced a line down the hill.

"Are we safe?" He asked doubtfully.

"No." Pervides answered, standing with the sword in his right hand and the cudgel in his left. Three horsemen had appeared at the top of the dune. They slowly made their way down the hill, the horses wading as if through waves. He was beautiful then, Pervides, standing so fiercely proud and defiant above his friend. Samson saw again the strong young man he first met. The thin body and ragged beard could do little to hide the fact that he was a superior man. It bore in him. It radiated from the way he approached not only these foes but life. He was a living ideal, though he seemed not entirely aware of it himself. Sunlight and shadow traced strange lines on his skin, and they rippled as he turned to keep his would be masters to his front. One of the men laughed from his horse, and the three drew their swords.

"Arabic?" One asked. Pervides made no answer. The man went on to say something else, which Samson translated to himself as, "oh well, it makes little difference," or something of that sort. The flash of Pervides' blade caught everyone by surprise. The rightmost horse buckled forward to the ground, his forelimb

severed. The rider caught himself on the beast's neck but could do little to prevent the returning blade from slashing across his face. Pervides darted to his left and eyed the remaining horsemen, who, only in the same moment, were able to steady their horses and back a few feet off. A fleeting, narrow, shadow and Pervides staggered. An arrow dug into his back, and his eyes opened wide with pain. One horseman stepped forward. Pervides swiped at him but missed. Samson heard the sound of the bow and from the corner of his eye saw the bowman at the top of the dune. A splash of blood splattered from Pervides' hamstring as the arrow struck his flesh. Pervides fell to his knees and struggled to keep his sword at the ready. He was faltering. Laughing, the two horsemen dismounted. One waved to the bowman, who made his way toward them. They were chatting in Arabic. Pervides remained on his knees, holding the sword in front of him and responding to the feints of the swordsmen. The bowman joined them and slung his bow over his shoulder. An earnest discussion seemed to be taking place, no doubt over their fate. It was heated. Two of the men were yelling at each other, and the bowman turned his back to Pervides. With a surge of energy Pervides launched himself across the five feet separating sword and man, burying the blade into the bowman's liver. Both men fell face first into the sand, blood flowing. The sand was red. Samson felt a gentle tug on his ankle. There was the feeling of doom in his mind, but he attempted to raise himself. His shoulder burned with pain. He made it to his knees and began to crawl toward Pervides. They were close, and Samson was trying to reach the cudgel, which lay beside Pervides, though he knew the swordsmen were watching, though he knew they would cut him down. He shut out everything else and focused on the cudgel. He held his right arm under him and crawled with his left and his knees. He inched forward. Weakness filled him, and as a shadow passed before his eyes he knew it was over. He closed his eyes and waited for the blade to fall. There was a scream, and everything was a dream.

Opening his eyes, Samson was senseless. The world had ceased to make sense. How could she be here? It was impossible. A fancy really. But still, here was Pervides on the ground before him and the cudgel just inches from his grasp. Poor Pervides. Face down, dying in the sand. And she; how had she gotten here? It was good. Very good. He should help. He reached out for the cudgel and collapsed face first at the feet of Pervides. He awoke to the beautiful wet kisses of Diadem's tongue, and he wondered anew at her presence. There was blood on her muzzle; so yes, it had been true. He had seen aright. The murderer had been drawing near, his sword raised above his head in preparation to sever Samson's head from his body, and then there was Diadem from out of nowhere, as if risen from the sand itself, tearing at the monster's throat with her vicious canine teeth and the man was screaming; oh such a wretched, life ending, scream. He had fallen on the ground, and she tore his throat out. She licked Samson now with the blood dripping from her teeth. Oh sweet, sweet, Diadem; dearest friend; savior; but how, but how? She lathered his face with welcome and whined and looked so happy and sad at the same time that Samson wanted so badly to weep and would have had he not heard Pervides groan and remembered. How had Pervides gotten on his back? Rising up, he knew. Paulus knelt beside Pervides and was attempting to stop the bleeding. Beside him, upright in the sand, was a sword stained with the final swordsman's blood. He had turned Pervides' head to the side so he could breath, and Samson inched forward until his face was but inches from his friend's.

"Pervides." He said. His voice was weak. Pervides' eyes shifted just the slightest bit.

"My foot." Pervides managed with a voice so soft that had Samson been six inches more distant he would not have heard.

"What?" Samson said, though he was afraid he already knew.

"Chop of my foot. Go. Go. My foot."

"No. No." Samson reached out and touched Pervides. He shook him by the shoulder. "Pervides." He was weeping now. "No." Paulus, knowing his task was to no use, sat back in the sand. His mouth opened as if to speak, but it closed again. "No!" Samson screamed, and he took Pervides' head in his hands. His shoulder had gone numb. He touched his forehead to Pervides', and his tears fell on his friend's cheeks. At last he kissed the dead man's forehead and sat up.

"A sword." He said with determination, and Paulus handed him his own blade. Samson struggled to stand and walked stiffly to Pervides' feet. Pushing the shackle above Pervides' ankle, he positioned the blade at the top of Pervides' foot. Paulus looked away as Samson raised the blade above his head, and as he hew down Diadem let out a chillingly mournful howl. The blade cut only half way, and Samson, after turning to vomit, made a second cut, which also did not sever the foot. After the third stroke he tossed the sword in the sand, bent down and removed the shackle from the bloody stump. Looking up his eyes were wide with disarray, and

Paulus approached to take him by the hand. He began to lead him toward the horses when suddenly Samson took back his hand and returned to Pervides.

"Sire." Paulus said gently. "We must be going. There will be more on the way."

"But I can't leave him like this."

"My lord."

"I cannot."

"But my lord, that is what he wanted. That is why he had you..."

"I can't." Samson was bewildered. Paulus approached, took him by the hand and lead him to his horse.

"Good old Dionysus." Samson muttered dreamily as he saw the old horse. "Of course you are here too." His voice was childlike, distant. Paulus helped him mount and tied the reins to the saddle of his own horse. As they set off Samson looked back and softly said, "Forgive me."

Chapter Thirty-eight

"How did you find me?" Samson asked a week later. He had been delirious until then and lay in a bed in Damascus. A doctor had just finished dressing his wound, and he and Paulus were alone.

"Diadem found you. I have just followed her. God knows how she did it."

She lay on the bed beside Samson. He could feel her warmth against his leg. He scratched her ears, and she let out a contented moan. She nuzzled closer against him. He began to pet her side, running his hand back and forth on the soft fur.

"I thought she was a dream, appearing like that. She saved my life. As did you. And Pervides. Again." Silence. A mournful, weak, look overtook his face. "Damn it, if only I had ducked a little sooner I never would have got this wound and we would have made it clean away. He died because of me. I lie here, while his bones, no doubt, lie in the same bloody spot, picked clean by vultures and jackals. He, the best man I have ever known. Do you know what kind of man he was? He was no ordinary soul Paulus. Not to me anyway. He was an ideal, or at least he should have been. My father robbed him of his rightful life, while I have taken up his very last breath. I want you to know, as I know, what kind of man we have lost. You have not known him or witnessed the truthful countenance he sometimes wore. He was pure in such a way men are not wont to be, in a way I shall never be, though I try my entire life. And that I must. I owe him that. Pervides, I remember your words well. 'Neither you nor I,' he told me once, 'shall be remembered beyond our lives, but the sum of our actions may have consequence in all the time yet to come.' Well friend, I shall remember you my entire life, and God willing, the sum of your actions shall not have been in vain. Fare thee well my friend, wherever you are. Of what I owe to you..." He closed his eyes, and after he did not open them for a few minutes Paulus arose and pulled the blanket fully over him. He listened to Samson's breath. It was frenetic, and after a few minutes Samson awoke screaming. Paulus rushed to him from an adjoining room. Samson was shaking his head, and Diadem, who had been startled by the scream, was licking his face. "I am fine Paulus." He said, holding up his hand. "It will only take a little time. Go, buy a cart. Let us set out tomorrow for home."

"Will you be ready to travel?"

"I cannot stay here. It has been too long besides. They shall think me dead. Again."

The road was long. Samson lay in the back of the cart and watched the miles pass. Amazing, he thought, how large the earth is. And I returning to my little speck I call home, while these others head toward their own specks, grand or small. Why do we ever leave, indeed, if we have joy where we are? Why did I leave? Had I only stayed with Pervides they never would have taken him, and he would be alive now. But how was I to know? A sense of anguish closed over him and would remain close to his heart the entire journey. Nothing seemed to brighten his despair, save the occasional free moment when he and Diadem played tug or he slept a deep dreamless sleep. His shoulder healed slowly, and for weeks he had a fever. He was gradually gaining strength, and by the time they reached Ankara he could ride a few hours each day. Reaching the Bosphorus they abandoned the wagon and in Constantinople boarded a ship for Venice.

Samson stared at the sea as the ship cut through the waves and tried not to think. There were memories trying to rise, and he did not want them to. He wanted to be empty, to forget. Men die he told

himself. How many thousands have gone since Pervides? How is it none of them affect me? I knew my father my entire life, but I felt no loss at his death. I do not miss him. I miss Pervides. Why? He gave me hope. There was something wordless in Samson now, cutting through the malaise which was his burden. It felt like candor. It is only through feeling we arrive at the truth. He stood a long while like that, facing the wind and sea, motionless, thoughtless; alive. A seagull floated in the sky a few dozen feet above him. It looked curiously at the ship. In its eye he saw something which made him laugh. Suddenly he felt like himself. Just for a moment, but it was long enough to rekindle his hope. The feeling passed, and he again was weak. He lay on the deck and closed his eyes. The gentle roll of the ship spun shadows in his dreams, wild colors which changed with every watery turn. What did it all mean? His thoughts began down a road too murky to make any headway. Things had happened in one fashion. That was reality. All the dreams before, and regrets since, did not change the reality. A man may make plans; he may have hopes and intuitions, but they are not true. Yet it is they which use up a man. Reality progresses moment by moment, but how little of it is truly witnessed or cherished. This moment. Here. Now. How little it seemed, yet it was in one such space that a man could change. It was such a moment for which death lingered. It was in such places that reality reminded a man that it was king and wiped away all hopes and dreams of the future. Reality was a villain that way. Samson opened his eyes and watched the gull overhead. It shrieked, and it seemed to say something. Lucky bird, he thought, free as the wind and too stupid to care for the loss of a friend. But I am alive, he suddenly realized, as if that was what the bird had said. I can dream new dreams and perhaps reality shall not crush them. I have lost the man most dear to me, yet when I return I shall find the woman I love. How long it has been since I thought of her. Yet she has been with me. How I long to see her.

He lay there a long while remembering Mirabel's face, her movements and every moment they had spent together. In the years since they had first met he had seen so little of her, a few brief weeks, but that time promised a lifetime of joy. What would reality have to say of that? Had anything happened to her while he was gone? He bolted upright. He had to get home. The unease grew upon him, and he paced the ship.

"Is everything okay my lord?" Paulus asked after watching him awhile.

"Can this ship go no faster?" Samson answered. The Italian shore was in sight, but it scarcely seemed to be drawing near. "We must get home Paulus. God knows what has gone on while we were away. If they have harmed her in any way..." He did not finish, but his eyes flashed with the possibility of his grief and vengeance. His feet struck anxiously at the deck.

When they reached Venice Paulus set out to purchase supplies while Samson waited for the horses to be unloaded. It took what seemed to him an insufferably long time, but at length they were on the road. They pushed hard. As had been the case the entire journey very little was said between the two men. As they paused the second night from Venice to rest a few hours, Samson suddenly took Paulus by the shoulder and looked into his eyes.

"Thank you." He said. Nothing more.

When they reached the place in the road where the manor di Gregoire first breached into view, the place Diadem met Samson when he returned from the island, Samson spurred Dionysus. The two men galloped through the town, followed by the ragged dog, whose paws were well worn after the many months afoot. Pedestrians paused to watch the scene and murmured at the raggedness, a few wondering out loud if it was indeed the missing lord. Samson's heart beat like a thunderstorm, and he touched the hilt of his sword, the same with which he had severed Pervides' foot, and wondered if he would have need to use it. The gates were open, and they burst through. Pulling up in a cloud of dust before the main doors, Samson was on the ground before the guard could address him.

"Open the doors!" He ordered as he ascended the steps. The guard, recognizing Paulus, if not Samson, called for the gates to open. The doorman obeyed, and word spread as fast as men could scuttle about the halls that the count had returned. The castle was abuzz, but no one dared approach Samson. He walked straight to his quarters, not for a moment expecting them to be occupied. His intention was to quickly change clothes, take some food for the road and set off to Mirabel at her father's. Great was his surprise when he entered his own entry and found the old Marquis di Alivo seated on a couch, enjoying a snack and reading over a few documents. The marquis let the papers fall and looked dumbfounded at his grandnephew. Samson stood in the doorway.

"Twice now you have come to me thus ravished." The marquis said emotionally. "I pray there shall not be a third." His eyes were moist, and he rose from the couch, opening his arms, into which Samson sprang.

"Welcome home my son." Samson felt himself weakened. In those elderly arms everything else for a moment disappeared and he was at ease. "Is no one else with you?" The marquis asked after a moment. Diadem had padded in behind him and flopped on the ground.

"Paulus." Samson said exhaustedly. "Pervides is dead."

"You found him then?"

"Yes. He saved my life again, and thus he died."

"God bless him."

"I will tell all in time, but I must see Mirabel first."

"Certainly, but Samson."

"Yes?"

"There are things you should know. I will tell you as quickly as I know how. Then go." So he told briefly of the baron's death, the treachery of Duncan and all that had transpired in his absence. "He remains in the dungeon, awaiting your sentence." He said of Duncan.

"There he shall remain." Samson said definitively.

"Do you wish to see him?"

"Not so long as I live."

"Why, if I may ask?"

"Because I would kill him."

Chapter Thirty-nine

Louis lay in the lush green grass beside the pond where as a child Mirabel had chased rabbits and dreams. He gnawed leisurely on a piece of cheese and washed it down with sips of fresh apple juice. His hair, wet from a relaxing dip in the stream, glistened in the sunlight. Nearby Mirabel sat in the shade and stared into the water. It had been five months.

She sighed and closed her eyes. The abundant calm of nature embalmed her with that peculiar feeling of oneness which seldom breaches even the most poetic mind. She was weak in a certain way; so deeply drawn within herself that the outside world, though quite clear in every detail, seemed distant. Ever so distant.

"Horses!" Louis called. She knew. She had heard them moments before thudding toward the house, the sound dumbly muted by the temperament of her mind. Louis was laughing suddenly. The sound of frolicking. She opened her eyes, and he was lost in a mad wrestling embrace with the long absent Diadem, whom he thought forever lost.

Mirabel looked toward the house. A horseman was at the crest of the hill, and she knew. Her heart burst into a blessed joy, though the weakness remained. The distant feeling remained as well, except that he was clear. The horse drew near at a gallop and slid to a halt. She afterward knew that she recognized it as Dionysus, but at the moment she saw only him. Samson vaulted to the ground and into her arms, and they embraced so deeply they could feel each other's heart beating in their chest. His arms seemed to melt into her back. His shoulder was a refuge for her face. But she did not weep, not at first anyway. There was merely a feeling of completeness, a sense that all such things had needed to happen and that by them the remainder of their lives would be that much more beautiful and reflective. There were no words. What words, indeed, could enhance such a moment or heal the wounds of distance any better than the warm embrace of silence? Leave them there, these lovers, in their own world. Allow them the rebirth of their dreams. Look instead at the dog and child, running in high strides of welcome to greet friend Paulus. Then the child stops, glances upward and awaits to see yet one more horse. There is none. The sense of gloom radiates so strong from the open eyes of the youth that the lovers turn to him. His face shrinks with waning hope; the final break in a loss nearly as old as his memory. The loneliness hangs on his head like a crown. With a word from Samson's eye, Mirabel understands. The lovers advance to the child and kneel.

"I am sorry." Samson says plainly. "Pervides is dead." Louis dives into the united arms of Samson and Mirabel, and there he feels safe. There he will always feel safe.